

Drenched in Light

Opportunity Magazine - December, 1924

By Zora Neale Hurston

You Isie Watts! Git 'own often dat gate post an' rake up dis yahd!"

The little brown figure perched upon the gate post looked yearningly up the gleaming shell road that led to Orlando, and down the road that led to Sanford and shrugged her thin shoulders. This heaped kindling on Grandma Patts' already burning ire.

"Lawd a-mussy!" she screamed, enraged—"Heah Joel, gimme dat wash stick. Ah'll show dat limb of Satan she kain't shake huhseff at *me*. If she ain't down by de time Ah gets dere, Ah'll break huh down in de lines" (loins).

"Aw Gran'ma, Ah see Mist' George and Jim Robinson cornin' and Ah wanted to wave at 'em," the child said petulantly.

"You jes wave dat rake at dis heah yahd, madame, else Ah'll take you down a button hole lower. You'se too 'oomanish jumpin' up in everybody's face dat pass."

This struck the child in a very sore spot for nothing pleased her so much as to sit atop of the gate post and hail the passing vehicled on their way South to Orlando, or North to Sanford. That white shell road was her great attraction. She raced up and down the stretch of it that lay before her gate like a round eyed puppy hailing gleefully all travelers. Everybody in the country, white and colored, knew little Isis Watts, the joyful. The Robinson brothers, white cattlemen, were particularly fond of her and always extended a stirrup for her to climb up behind one of them for a short ride, or let her try to crack the long bull whips and tee whoo at the cows.

Grandma Potts went inside and Isis literally waved the rake at the "chaws" of ribbon cane that lay so bountifully about the yard in company with the

knots and peelings, with a thick sprinkling of peanut hulls.

The herd of cattle in their envelope of gray dust came alongside and Isis dashed out to the nearest stirrup and was lifted up.

”Hello theah Snidlits, I was wonderin’ wheah you was,” said Jim Robinson as she snuggled down behind him in the saddle. They were almost out of the danger zone when Grandma emerged.

“You Isie-s!” she bawled.

The child slid down on the opposite side from the house and executed a flank movement through the corn patch that brought her into the yard from behind the privy.

“You liT hasion you! Wheah you been?”

“Out in de back yahd” Isis lied and did a cart wheel and a few fancy steps on her way to the front again.

“If you doan git tuh dat yahd, Ah make a mommuk of you!” Isis observed that Grandma was cutting a fancy assortment of switches from peach, guana and cherry trees.

She finished the yard by raking everything under the edge of the porch and began a romp with the dogs, those lean, floppy eared ’coon hounds that all country folks keep. But Grandma vetoed this also.

“Isie, you set ’own on dat porch! Uh great big ’leben yeah ole gal racin’ an’ rompin’ lak dat— set ’own!”

Isis impatiently flung herself upon the steps.

“Git up offa dem steps, you aggavatin’ limb, ’fore Ah git dem hick’ries tuh you, an’ set yo’ seff on a cheah.”

Isis petulently arose and sat down as violently as possible in a chair, but slid down until she all but sat upon her shoulder blades.

“Now look atcher,” Grandma screamed, “Put yo’ knees together, an’ git up offen yo’ backbone! Lawd, you know dis hellion is gwine make me stomp huh insides out.”

Isis sat bolt upright as if she wore a ramrod down her back and began to whistle. Now there are certain things that Grandma Potts felt no one of this female persuasion should do—one was to sit with the knees separated, “settin’ brazen” she called it; another was whistling, another playing with boys, neither must a lady cross her legs.

Up she jumped from her seat to get the switches.

“So youse, whistlin’ in mah face, huh!” She glared till her eyes were beady and Isis bolted for safety. But the noon hour brought John Watts, the widowed father, and this excused the child from sitting for criticism.

Being the only girl in the family, of course she must wash the dishes, which she did in intervals between frolics with the dogs. She even gave Jake, the puppy, a swim in the dishpan by holding him suspended above the water that reeked of “pot likker”—just high enough so that his feet would be immersed. The deluded puppy swam and swam without ever crossing the pan, much to his annoyance. Hearing Grandma she hurriedly dropped him on the floor, which he tracked up with feet wet with dishwater.

Grandma took her patching and settled down in the front room to sew. She did this every afternoon, and invariably slept in the big red rocker with her head lolled back over the back, the sewing falling from her hand.

Isis had crawled under the center table with its red plush cover with little round balls for fringe. She was lying on her back imagining herself various personages. She wore trailing robes, golden slippers with blue bottoms. She rode white horses with flaring pink nostrils to the horizon, for she still believed that to be land’s end. She was picturing herself gazing over the edge of the world into the abyss when the spool of cotton fell from Grandma’s lap and rolled away under the whatnot.

Isis drew back from her contemplation of the nothingness at the horizon and glanced up at the sleeping woman. Her head had fallen far back. She

breathed with a regular “snark” intake and soft “poosah” exhaust. But Isis was a visual minded child. She heard the snores only subconsciously but she saw straggling beard on Grandma's chin, trembling a little with every “snark” and “poosah”. They were long gray hairs curled here and there against the dark brown skin. Isis was moved with pity for her mother’s mother.

“Poah Gran-ma needs a shave,” she murmured, and set about it. Just then Joel, next older than Isis, entered with a can of bait.

“Come on Isie, les’ we all go fishin’. The perch is bitin’ fine in Blue Sink.”

“Sh-sh—” cautioned his sister, “Ah got to shave Gran’ma.”

“Who say so?” Joel asked, surprised.

“Nobody doan hafta tell me. Look at her chin. No ladies don’t weah no whiskers if they kin help it. But Gran’ma gittin’ ole an* she doan know how to shave like me.”

The conference adjourned to the back porch lest Grandma wake.

“Aw, Isie, you doan know nothin’ ’bout shavin’ a-tall—but a *man* lak *me*---
-”

“Ah do so know.”

“You don’t not. Ah’m goin’ shave her mahseff.” “Naw’, you won’t neither, Smarty. Ah saw her first an’ thought it all up first,” Isis declared, and ran to the calico covered box on the wall above the wash basin and seized her father’s razor. Joel was quick and seized the mug and brush.

“Now!” Isis cried defiantly, “Ah got the razor.” “Goody, goody, goody, pussy cat, Ah got th’ brush an’ you can’t shave ’thout lather—see! Ah know mo’ than you,” Joel retorted.

“Aw, w’ho don’t know dat?” Isis pretended to scorn. But seeing her progress blocked for lack of lather she compromised.

“Ah know! Les’ we all shave her. You lather an’ Ah shave.”

This was agreeable to Joel. He made mountains of lather and anointed his own chin, and the chin of Isis and the dogs, splashed the walls and at last was persuaded to lather Grandma’s chin. Not that he was loath but he wanted his new plaything to last as long as possible.

Isis stood on one side of the chair with the razor clutched cleaver fashion. The niceties of razor-handling had passed over her head. The thing with her was to *hold* the razor—sufficient in itself.

Joel splashed on the lather in great gobs and Grandma awoke.

For one bewildered moment she stared at the grinning boy with the brush and mug but sensing another presence, she turned to behold the business face of Isis and the razor-clutching hand. Her jaw dropped and Grandma, forgetting years and rheumatism, bolted from the chair and fled the house, screaming.

“She’s gone to tell papa, Isie. You didn’t have no business wid his razor and he’s gonna lick yo hide,” Joel cried, running to replace mug and brush.

“You too, chuckle-head, you, too,” retorted Isis. “You was playin’ wid his brush and put it all over the dogs—Ah seen you put it on Ned an’ Beulah.” Isis shaved some slivers from the door jamb with the razor and replaced it in the box. Joel took his bait and pole and hurried to Blue Sink. Isis crawled under the house to brood over the whipping she knew would come. She had meant well.

But sounding brass and tinkling cymbal drew* her forth. The local lodge of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows led by a braying, thudding band, was marching in full regalia down the road. She had forgotten the barbecue and log-rolling to be held today for the benefit of the new^r hall.

Music to Isis meent motion. In a minute razor and whipping forgotten, she was doing a fair imitation of the Spanish dancer she had seen in a medicine show some time before. Isis’ feet were gifted—she could dance most anything she saw.

Up, up went her spirits, her brown little feet doing all sorts of intricate things and her body in rhythm, hand curving above her head. But the music was growing faint. Grandma nowhere in sight. She stole out of the gate, running and dancing after the band.

Then she stopped. She couldn't dance at the carnival. Her dress was torn and dirty. She picked a long stemmed daisy and thrust it behind her ear. But the dress, no better. Oh, an idea! In the battered round topped trunk in the bedroom!

She raced back to the house, then, happier, raced down the white dusty road to the picnic grove, gorgeously clad. People laughed good naturedly at her, the band played and Isis danced because she couldn't help it. A crowd of children gather admiringly about her as she wheeled lightly about, hand on hip, flower between her teeth with the red and white fringe of the tablecloth— Grandma's new red tablecloth that she wore in lieu of a Spanish shawl—trailing in the dust. It was too ample for her meager form, but she wore it like a gipsy. Her brown feet twinkled in and out of the fringe. Some grown people joined the children about her. The Grand Exalted Ruler rose to speak; the band was hushed, but Isis danced on, the crowd clapping their hands for her. No one listened to the Exalted one, for little by little the multitude had surrounded the brown dancer.

An automobile drove up to the Crown and halted. Two white men and a lady got out and pushed into the crowd, suppressing mirth discreetly behind gloved hands. Isis looked up and waved them a magnificent hail and went on dancing until—

Grandma had returned to the house and missed Isis and straightway sought her at the festivities expecting to find her in her soiled dress, shoeless. gaping at the crowd, but what she saw" drove her frantic. Here was her granddaughter dancing before a gaping crowd in her brand new red tablecloth, and reeking of lemon extract, for Isis had added the final touch to her costume. She *must* have perfume.

Isis saw Grandma and bolted. She heard her cry: "Mah Gawd, mah brand new table cloth Ah jus' bought f'um O'landah!" as she fled through the crowd and on into the woods.

II

She followed the little creek until she came to the ford in a rutty wagon road that led to Apopka and laid down on the cool grass at the roadside. The April sun was quite hot.

Misery, misery and woe settled down upon her and the child wept. She knew another whipping was in store for her.

“Oh, Ah wish Ah could die, then Gran’ma an’ papa would be sorry they beat me so much. Ah b’leeve Ah’ll run away an’ never go home no mo’. Ah’m goin’ drown mahseff in th’ creek!” Her woe grew attractive.

Isis got up and waded into the water. She routed out a tiny ’gator and a huge bull frog. She splashed and sang, enjoying herself immensely. The purr of a motor struck her ear and she saw a large, powerful car jolting along the rutty road toward her. It stopped at the water’s edge.

“Well, I declare, it’s our little gypsy,” exclaimed the man at the wheel. “What are you doing here, now?”

“Ah’m killin’ mahseff,” Isis declared dramatically, “Cause Gran’ma beats me too much.”

There was a hearty burst of laughter from the machine.

“You’ll last sometime the way you are going about it. Is this the way to Maitland? We want to go to the Park Hotel.”

Isis saw no longer any reason to die. She came up out of the water, holding up the dripping fringe of the tablecloth.

“Naw, indeedy. You go to Maitlan’ by the shell road—it goes by mah house—an’ turn off at Lake Sebelia to the clay road that takes you right to the do’.”

“Well,” went on the driver, smiling furtively, “Could you quit dying long enough to go with us?”

“Yessuh,” she said thoughtfully, “Ah wanta go wid you.”

The door of the car swung open. She was invited to a seat beside the driver. She had often dreamed of riding in one of these heavenly chariots but never thought she would, actually.

“Jump in then, Madame Tragedy, and show us. We lost ourselves after we left your barbecue.”

During the drive Isis explained to the kind lady who smelt faintly of violets and to the indifferent men that she was really a princess. She told them about her trips to the horizon, about the trailing gowns, the gold shoes with blue bottoms—she insisted on the blue bottoms—the white charger, the time when she was Hercules and had slain numerous dragons and sundry giants. At last the car approached her gate over which stood the umbrella China-berry tree. The car was abreast of the gate and had all but passed when Grandma spied her glorious tablecloth lying back against the upholstery of the Packard.

“You Isie-e!” she bawled, “You lil’ wretch you! come heah *dis instunt*.”

“That’s me,” the child confessed, mortified, to the lady’ on the rear seat.

“Oh, Sewell, stop the car. This is where the child lives. I hate to give her up though.”

“Do you wanta keep me?” Isis brightened.

“Oh, I wish I could, you shining little morsel.

Wait, I’ll try to save you a whipping this time.” She dismounted with the gaudy lemon flavored

culprit and advanced to the gate where Grandma stood glowering, switches in hand.

“You’re gointuh ketchit f’um yo’ haid to yo’ heels m’lady. Jes’ come in heah.”

“Why, good afternoon,” she accosted the furious grandparent. “You’re not going to whip this poor little thing, are you?” the lady asked in conciliatory tones.

“Yes, Ma’am. She’s de wustest lil’ limb dat ever drawed bref. Jes’ look at mah new table cloth, dat ain’t never been washed. She done traipsed all over de woods, uh dancin’ an’ uh prancin’ in it. She done took a razor to me t’day an’ Lawd knows whut mo’.”

Isis clung to the white hand fearfully.

“Ah wuzn’t gointer hurt Gran’ma, miss—Ah . wuz jus’ gointer shave her whiskers fuh huh ’cause she’s old an’ can’t.”

The white hand closed tightly over the little brown one that was quite soiled. She could understand a voluntary act of love even though it miscarried.

“Now, Mrs. er—er—I didn’t get the name— how much did your tablecloth cost?”

“One whole big silvah dollar down at O’landah
—ain’t had it a week yit.”

“Now here’s five dollars to get another one. The little thing loves laughter. I want her to go on to the hotel and dance in that tablecloth for me. I can stand a little light today—”

“Oh, yessum, yessum,” Grandma cut in, “Everything’s alright, sho’ she kin go, yessum.”

The lady went on: “I want brightness and this Isis is joy itself, why she’s drenched in light!”

Isis for the first time in her life, felt herself appreciated and danced up and down in an ecstasy of joy for a minute.

“Now, behave yo’seff, Isie, ovah at de hotel wid de white folks,” Grandma cautioned, pride in her voice, though she strove to hide it. “Lawd, ma’am, dat gal keeps me so frackshus, Ah doan know mah haid f’um mah feet. Ah orter comb huh haid, too, befo’ she go wid you all.”

“No, no, don’t bother. I like her as she is. I don’t think she’d like it either, being combed and scrubbed. Come on, Isis.”

Feeling that Grandma had been somewhat squelched did not detract from Isis' spirit at all. She pranced over to the waiting motor and this time seated herself on the rear seat between the sweet, smiling lady and the rather aloof man in gray.

“Ah'm gointer stay wid you all,” she said with a great deal of warmth, and snuggled up to her benefactress. “Want me tuh sing a song fuh you ?”

“There, Helen, you’ve been adopted,” said the man with a short, harsh laugh.

“Oh, I hope so, Harry.” She put her arm about the red draped figure at her side and drew it close until she felt the warm puffs of the child’s breath against her side. She looked hungrily ahead of her and spoke into space rather than to anyone in the car. “I want a little of her sunshine to soak into my soul. I need it.”

Spunk

Opportunity Magazine - June, 1925

By Zora Neale Hurston

Awarded Second Prize

A **GIANT** of a brown skinned man sauntered up the one street of the Village and out into the palmetto thickets with a small pretty woman clinging lovingly to his arm.

“Looka theah, folkses!” cried Elijah Mosley, slapping his leg gleefully. “Theah they go, big as life an' brassy as tacks.”

All the loungers in the store tried to walk to the door with an air of nonchalance but with small success.

“Now pee-eople!” Walter Thomas gasped, “Will you look at 'em!”

“But that's one thing Ah likes about Spunk Banks—he ain't skeered of nothin' on God's green footstool—*nothin' I* He rides that log down at saw-mill jus' like he struts 'round wid another man's wife—jus' don't give a kitty. When Tes' Miller got cut to giblets on that circle-saw, Spunk steps right up and starts ridin'. The rest *of* us was skeered to go near it.”

A round shouldered figure in overalls much too large, came nervously in the door and the talking ceased. The men looked at each other and winked.

“Gimme some soda-water. Sass'prilla Ah reckon,” the new-comer ordered, and stood far down the counter near the open pickled pig-feet tub to drink it.

Elijah nudged Walter and turned with mock gravity to the new-comer.

“Say Joe, how's everything up yo' way? How's yo' wife?”

Joe started and all but dropped the bottle he held in his hands. He swallowed several times painfully and his lips trembled.

“Aw ’Lige, you oughtn’t to do nothin’ like that,” Walter grumbled. Elijah ignored him.

“She jus’ passed heah a few minutes ago goin’ thata way,” with a wave of his hand in the direction of the woods.

Now Joe knew his wife had passed that way. He knew that the men lounging in the general store had seen her, moreover, he knew that the men knew *he* knew. He stood there silent for a long moment staring blankly, with his Adam’s apple twitching nervously up and down his throat. One could actually see the pain he was suffering, his eyes, his face, his hands and even the dejected slump of his shoulders. He set the bottle down upon the counter. He didn’t bang it, just eased it out of his hand silently and fiddled with his suspender buckle.

“Well, Ah’m goin’ after her today. Ah’m goin’ an’ fetch her back. Spunk’s done gone too fur.”

He reached deep down into his trouser pocket and drew out a hollow ground razor, large and shiny, and passed his moistened thumb back and forth over the edge.

“Talkin’ like a man, Joe. Course that’s yo’ fambly affairs, but Ah like to see grit in anybody.”

Joe Kanty laid down a nickel and stumbled out into the street.

Dusk crept in from the woods. Ike Clarke lit the swinging oil lamp that was almost immediately surrounded by candle-flies. The men laughed boisterously behind Joe’s back as they watched him shamble woodward.

“You oughtn’t to said whut you did to him, Lige, —look how it worked him up,” Walter chided.

“And Ah hope it did work him up. Tain’t even decent for a man to take and take like he do.”

“Spunk will sho’ kill him.”

“Aw, Ah doan’t know. You never kin tell. He might turn him up an’ spank him fur gettin’ in the way, but Spunk wouldn’t shoot no unarmed man. Dat razor he carried outa heah ain’t gonna run Spunk down an’ cut him, an’ Joe ain’t got the nerve to go up to Spunk with it knowing he totes that Army 45. He makes that break outa heah to bluff us. He’s gonna hide that razor behind the first likely palmetto root an’ sneak back home to bed. Don’t tell me nothin’ ’bout that rabbit-foot colored man. Didn’t he meet Spunk an’ Lena face to face one day las’ week an’ mumble sumthin’ to Spunk ’bout lettin’ his wife alone?”

“What did Spunk say?” Walter broke in—“Ah like him fine but tain’t right the way he carries on wid Lena Kanty, jus’ cause Joe’s timid ’bout fightin’ ”.

“You wrong theah, Walter. ’Tain’t cause Joe’s timid at all, it’s cause Spunk wants Lena. If Joe was a passle of wile cats Spunk would tackle the job just the same. He’d go after *anything* he wanted the same way. As Ah wuz sayin’ a minute ago, he tole Joe right to his face that Lena was his. ‘Call her,’ he says to Joe. ‘Call her and see if she’ll come. A woman knows her boss an’ she answers when he calls.’ ‘Lena, ain’t I yo’ husband?’ Joe sorter whines out. Lena looked at him real disgusted but she don’t answer and she don’t move outa her tracks. Then Spunk reaches out an’ takes hold of her arm an’ says: ‘Lena, youse mine. From now on Ah works for you an’ fights for you an’ Ah never wants you to look to nobody for a crumb of bread, a stitch of close or a shingle to go over yo’ head, but *me* long as Ah live. Ah’ll git the lumber foh owah house tomorrow. Go home an’ git yo’ things together!’ ”

“ ‘Thass mah house’ Lena speaks up. ‘Papa gimme that.’

“Well,” says Spunk, “doan give up whut’s yours, but when youse inside don’t forgit youse mine, an’ let no other man git outa his place wid you!”

“Lena looked up at him with her eyes so full of love that they wuz runnin’ over an’ Spunk seen it an’ Joe seen it too, and his lip started to tremblin’ and his Adam’s apple was galloping up and down his neck like a race horse. Ah bet he’s wore out half a dozen Adam’s apples since Spunk’s been on the job with Lena. That’s all he’ll do. He’ll be back heah after while swallowin’ an’ workin’ his lips like he wants to say somethin’ an’ can’t.”

"But didn't he do *nothin'* to stop 'em?"

“Nope, not a frazzlin’ thing—jus’ stood there. Spunk took Lena’s arm and walked off jus’ like nothin’ ain’t happened and he stood there gazin’ after them till they was outa sight. Now you know a woman don’t want no man like that. I’m jus’ waitin’ to see whut he’s goin’ to say when he gits back.”

II

But Joe Kanty never came back, never. The men in the store heard the sharp report of a pistol somewhere distant in the palmetto thicket and soon Spunk came walking leisurely, with his big black Stetson set at the same rakish angle and Lena clinging to his arm, came walking right into the general store. Lena wept in a frightened manner.

"Well," Spunk announced calmly, "Joe come out there wid a meatax an’ made me kill him."

He sent Lena home and led the men back to Joe— Joe crumple and limp with his right hand still clutching his razor.

“See mah back? Mah does cut clear through. He sneaked up an’ tried to kill me from the back, but Ah got him, an’ got him good, first shot,” Spunk said.

The men glared at Elijah, accusingly.

“Take him up an’ plant him in ‘Stoney lonesome’,” Spunk said in a careless voice. “Ah didn’t wanna shoot him but he made me do it. He’s a dirty coward, jumpin’ on a man from behind.”

Spunk turned on his heel and sauntered away to where he knew his love wept in fear for him and no man stopped him. At the general store later on, they all talked of locking him up until the sheriff should come from Orlando, but no one did anything but talk.

A clear case of self-defense, the trial was a short one, and Spunk walked out of the court house to freedom again. He could work again, ride the dangerous log-carriage that fed the singing, snarling, biting, circle-saw; he could stroll the soft dark lanes with his guitar. He was free to roam the woods again; he was free to return to Lena. He did all of these things.

III

“Whut you reckon, Walt?” Elijah asked one night later. “Spunk’s gittin’ ready to marry Lena!”

“Naw! Why Joe ain’t had time to git cold yit. Nohow Ah didn’t figger Spunk was the marryin’ kind.”

“Well, he is,” rejoined Elijah. “He done moved most of Lena’s things—and her along wid ’em— over to the Bradley house. He’s buying it. Jus’ like Ah told yo’ all right in heah the night Joe wuz kilt. Spunk’s crazy bout Lena. He don’t want folks to keep on talkin’ ’bout her—thass reason he’s rushin’ so. Funny thing ’bout that bob-cat, wan’t it?”

“Whut bob-cat, ’Lige? Ah ain’t heered ’bout none.”

“Ain’t cher? Well, night befo’ las’ was the fust night Spunk an’ Lena moved together an’ jus’ as they was goin’ to bed, a big black bob-cat, black all over, you hear me, *black*, walked round and round that house and howled like forty, an’ when Spunk got his gun an’ went to the winder to shoot it, he says it stood right still an’ looked him in the eye, an’ howled right at him. The thing got Spunk so nervoused up he couldn’t shoot. But Spunk says twan’t no bob-cat nohow. He says it was Joe done sneaked back from Hell!”

“Humph!” sniffed Walter, “he oughter be nervous after what he done. Ah reckon Joe come back to dare him to marry Lena, or to come out an’ fight.

Ah bet he'll be back time and agin, too. Know what Ah think? Joe wuz a braver man than Spunk."

There was a general shout of derision from the group.

"Thass a fact," went on Walter. "Lookit whut he done; took a razor an' went out to fight a man he knowed toted a gun an' wuz a crack shot, too; 'nother thing Joe wuz skeered of Spunk, skeered plumb stiff! But he went jes' the same. It took him a long time to get his nerve up. 'Tain't nothin' for Spunk to fight when he ain't skeered of nothin'. Now, Joe's done come back to have it out wid the man that's got all he ever had. Y'll know Joe ain't never had nothin' nor wanted nothin' besides Lena. It musta been a h'ant cause ain' nobody never seen no black bob-cat."

" 'Nother thing," cut in one of the men, "Spunk waz cussin' a blue streak today 'cause he 'lowed dat saw wuz wobblin'—almos' got 'im once. The machinist come, looked it over an' said it wuz alright. Spunk musta been leanin' t'wards it some. Den he claimed somebody pushed 'im but 'twant nobody close to 'im. Ah wuz glad when knockin' off time come. I'm skeered of dat man when he gits hot. He'd beat you full of button holes as quick as he's look atcher."

IV

The men gathered the next evening in a different mood, no laughter. No badinage this time.

"Look 'Lige, you goin' to set up wid Spunk?"

"Naw, Ah reckon not, Walter. Tell yuh the truth, Ah'm a lil bit skittish. Spunk died too wicket —died cussin' he did. You know he thought he wuz done outa life."

"Good Lawd, who'd he think done it?"

"Joe."

"Joe Kanty? How come?"

“Walter, Ah b’leeve Ah will walk up thata way an’ set. Lena would like it Ah reckon.”

“But whut did he say, ’Lige?”

Elijah did not answer until they had left the lighted store and were strolling down the dark street.

“Ah wuz loadin’ a wagon wid scantlin’ right near the saw when Spunk fell on the carriage but ’fore Ah could git to him the saw got him in the body—awful sight. Me an’ Skint Miller got him off but it was too late. Anybody could see that. The fust thing he said wuz: ‘He pushed me, Lige—the dirty hound pushed me in the back!’—He was spittin’ blood at ev’ry breath. We laid him on the sawdust pile with his face to the East so’s he could die easy. He helt mah han’ till the last, Walter, and said: ‘It was Joe, ’Lige—the dirty sneak shoved me ... he didn’t dare come to mah face . . . but Ah’ll git the son-of-a-wood louse soon’s Ah get there an’ make hell too hot for him. . . . Ah felt him shove me. . . .!’ Thass how he died.”

“If spirits kin fight, there’s a powerful tussle goin’ on somewhere ovah Jordan ’cause Ah b’leeve Joe’s ready for Spunk an’ ain’t skeered anymore—yas, Ah b’leeve Joe pushed ’im mahself.”

They had arrived at the house. Lena’s lamentations were deep and loud. She had filled the room with magnolia blossoms that gave off a heavy sweet odor. The keepers of the wake tipped about whispering in frightened tones. Everyone in the Village was there, even old Jeff Kanty, Joe’s father, who a few hours before would have been afraid to come within ten feet of him, stood leering triumphantly down upon the fallen giant as if his fingers had been the teeth of steel that laid him low.

The cooling board consisted of three sixteen-inch boards on saw horses, a dingy sheet was his shroud.

The women ate heartily of the funeral baked meats and wondered who would be Lena’s next. The men whispered coarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey.

John Redding Goes to Sea

Opportunity Magazine - January, 1926

By Zora Neale Hurston

THE Villagers said that John Redding was a queer child. His mother thought he was too. She would shake her head sadly, and observe to John's father: "Alf, it's too bad our boy's got a spell on 'im."

The father always met this lament with indifference, if not impatience.

"Aw, woman, stop dat talk 'bout conjure. Tain't so nohow. Ah doan want J awn tuh git dat foolishness in *him*"

"Cose you alius tries tuh know mo' than me, but Ah ain't so ign'rant. Ah knows a heap mahself. Many and manys the people been drove outa their senses by conjuration, or rid tuh deat' by witches."

"Ah keep on telling yuh, woman, tain's so. B'lieve it all you wants tuh, but dontcha tell mah son none of it."

Perhaps ten-year old John *was* puzzling to the simple folk there in the Florida woods for he was an imaginative child and fond of day-dreams. The St. John River flowed a scarce three hundred feet from his back door. On its banks at this point grow numerous palms, luxuriant magnolias and bay trees with a dense undergrowth of ferns, cat-tails and rope-grass. On the bosom of the stream float millions of delicately colored hyacinths. The little brown boy loved to wander down to the waters edge, and, casting in dry twigs, watch them sail away down stream to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world and John Redding wanted to follow them.

Sometimes in his dreams he was a prince, riding away in a gorgeous carriage Often he was a knight bestride a fiery charger prancing down the white shell road that led to distant lands. At other times he was a steamboat captain piloting his craft down the St. John River to where the sky seemed to touch the water. No matter what he dreamed or who he fancied himself to

be, he always ended by riding away to the horizon; for in his childish ignorance he thought this to be farthest land.

But these twigs, which John called his ships, did not always sail away. Sometimes they would be swept in among the weeds growing in the shallow water, and be held there. One day his father came upon him scolding the weeds for stopping his seagoing vessels.

“Let go mah ships! You ole mean weeds you!” John screamed and stamped impotently. “They wants tuh go ’way. You let ’em go on!”

Alfred laid his hand on his son's head lovingly. “What’s mattah, son?”

“Mah ships, pa,” the child answered weeping. “Ah throwed ’em in to go way off an’ them ole weeds won’t let ’em.”

“Well, well, doan cry. Ah thought youse uh grown up man. Men doan cry lak babies. You musn’t take it too hard ’bout yo’ ships. You gotta git uster things gittin’ tied up. They’s lotser folks that ’ud go on off too ef somethin* didn’ ketch ’em an’ hoi’ ’em!”

Alfred Redding’s brown face grew wistful for a moment, and the child noticing it, asked quickly: “Do weeds tangle up folks too, pa?”

“Now, no, chile, doan be takin’ too much stock of what ah say. Ah talks in parables sometimes. Come on, les go on tuh supper.”

Alf took his son’s hand, and started slowly toward the house. Soon John broke the silence.

“Pa, when ah gets as big as you Ah’m goin’ farther than them ships. Ah’m goin’ to where the sky touches the ground.”

“Well, son, when Ah wuz a boy Ah said Ah wuz goin’¹ too, but heah Ah am. Ah hopes you have bettah luck than me.”

“Pa, Ah betcha Ah seen somethin’ in th’ woodlot you ain’t seen!”

“Whut?”

“See dat tallest pine tree ovah dere how it looks like a skull wid a crown on?”

“Yes, indeed!” said the father looking toward the tree designated. “It do look lak a skull since you call mah ’tention to it. You ’magine lotser things nobody else evah did, son!”

“Sometimes, Pa dat ole tree waves at me just aftah th’ sun goes down, an’ makes me sad an’ skeered, too.”

“Ah specks youse skeered of de dahk, thas all, sonny. When you gits biggah you won’t think of sich.”

Hand in hand the two trudged across the plowed land and up to the house, the child dreaming of the days when he should wander to far countries, and the man of the days when he might have—and thus they entered the kitchen.

Matty Redding, John’s mother, was setting the table for supper. She was a small wiry woman with large eyes that might have been beautiful when she was young, but too much weeping had left them watery and weak.

“Matty,” Alf began as he took his place at the table, “Dontcha know our boy is different from any othah chile roun’ heah. He ’lows he’s goin’ to sea when he gits grown, an’ Ah reckon Ah’ll let ’im.”

The woman turned from the stove, skillet in hand. “Alf, you ain’t gone crazy, is you? John kain’t help wantin’ tuh stray off, cause he’s got a spell on ’im; but *you* oughter be shamed to be encouragin’ him.’

“Ain’t Ah done tol’ you forty times not tuh tahk dat low-life mess in front of mah boy?”

“Well, ef tain’t no conjure in de world, how come Mitch Potts been layin’ on his back six mont’s an’ de doctah kain’t do ’im no good? Answer me dat. The very night John wuz bawn, Granny seed ole Witch Judy Davis creepin’ outer dis yahd. You know she had swore tuh fix me fuh maryin’ you, ’way from her darter Edna. She put travel dust down fuh mah chile, dat’s whut

she done, tuh make him walk 'way fum me. An' evuh sence he's been able tuh crawl, he's been tryin tuh go."

"Matty, a man doan need no travel dust tuh make 'im wanten hit de road. It jes' comes natch-eral fuh er man tuh travel. Dey all wants tuh go at some time or other but they kain't all get away. Ah wants mah John tuh go an' see cause Ah wanted to go mah self. When he comes back Ah kin see them furrin places wid his eyes. He kain't help wantin' tuh go cause he's a man chile!"

Mrs. Redding promptly went off into a fit of weeping but the man and boy ate supper unmoved. Twelve years of married life had taught Alfred that far from being miserable when she wept, his wife was enjoying a bit of self-pity.

Thus John Redding grew to manhood, playing, studying and dreaming. He attended the village school as did most of the youth about him, but he also went to high school at the county seat where none of the villagers went. His father shared his dreams and ambitions, but his mother could not understand why he should wish to go strange places where neither she nor his father had been. No one of their community had ever been farther away than Jacksonville. Few indeed had even been there. Their own gardens, general store, and occasional trips to the county seat—seven miles away—sufficed for all their needs. Life was simple indeed with these folk.

John was the subject of much discussion among the country folk. Why didn't he teach school instead of thinking about strange places and people? Did he think himself better than any of the "gals" there about that he would not go a-courting any of them? He muss be "fixed" as his mother claimed, else where did his queer notions come from? Well, he was always queer, and one could not expect the man to be different from the child. They never failed to stop work at the approach of Alfred in order to be at the fence and inquire after John's health and ask when he expected to leave.

"Oh," Alfred would answer, "Jes' as soon as his mah gits reconciled to th' notion. He's a mighty dutiful boy, mah John is. He doan wanna hurt her feelings."

The boy had on several occasions attempted to reconcile his mother to the notion, but found it a difficult task. Matty always took refuge in self-pity and tears. Her son's desires were incomprehensible to her, that was all. She did not want to hurt him. It was love, mother love, that made her cling so desperately to John.

"Lawd knows," she would sigh, "Ah nevah wuz happy an' nevah specks tuh be."

"An' from yo' actions," put in Alfred hotly, "You's determined *not* to be."

"Thas right, Alfred, go on an* 'buse me. You alius does. Ah knows Ah'm ign'rant an' all dat, but dis is mah son. Ah bred an' born 'im. He kain't help from wantin' to go rovin' cause travel dust been put down fuh him. But mebbe we kin cure 'im by disincouragin' the idee."

"Well, Ah wants mah son tuh go; an' he wants tuh go too. He's a man now, Matty. An' we mus' let John hoe his own row. If it's travelin' twon't be foh long. He'll come back to us bettah than when he went off. What do you say, son?"

"Mamma," John began slowly, "It hurts me to see you so troubled over my going away; but I feel that I must go. I'm stagnating here. This indolent atmosphere will stifle every bit of ambition that's in me. Let me go mamma, please. What is there here for me? Why, sometimes I get to feeling just like a lump of dirt turned over by the plow—just where it falls there's where it lies—no thought or movement or nothing. I want to make myself something—not just stay where I was born."

"Naw, John, it's bettah for you to stay heah and take over the school. Why don't you marry and settle down?"

"I don't *want* to, mamma. I want to go away." "Well," said Mrs. Redding, pursing her mouth tightly, "You ainta goin' wid *mah* consent!"

"I'm sorry mamma, that you won't consent. I am going nevertheless."

“John, John, mah baby! You wouldn’t kill yc’ po’ ole mamma, would you? Come, kiss me, son.”

The boy flung his arms about his mother and held her closely while she sobbed on his breast. To all of her pleas, however, he answered that he must go.

“I’ll stay at home this year, mamma, then I’ll go for a while, but it won’t be long. I’ll come back and make you and papa oh so happy. Do you agree, mama dear?”

“Ah reckon tain’ nothin’ tall fuh me to do else.”

Things went on very well around the Redding home for some time. During the day John helped his father about the farm and read a great deal at night.

Then the unexpected happened. John married Stella Kanty, a neighbor’s daughter. The courtship was brief but ardent—on John’s part at least. He danced with Stella at a candy-pulling, walked with her home and in three weeks had declared himself. Mrs. Redding declared that she was happier than she had ever been in her life. She therefore indulged in a whole afternoon of weeping. John’s change was occasioned possibly by the fact that Stella was really beautiful; he was young and red-blooded, and the time was spring.

Spring-time in Florida is not a matter of peeping violets or bursting buds merely. It is a riot of color in nature—glistening green leaves, pink, blue, purple, yellow blossoms that fairly stagger the visitor from the north. The miles of hyacinths lie like an undulating carpet on the surface of the river and divide reluctantly when the slow-moving alligators push their way log-like across. The nights are white nights for the moon shines with dazzling splendor, or in the absence of that goddess, the soft darkness creeps down laden with innumerable scents. The heavy fragrance of magnolias mingled with the delicate sweetness of jasmine and wild roses.

If time and propinquity conquered John, what then? These forces have overcome older men.

The raptures of the first few weeks over, John began to saunter out to the gate to gaze wistfully down the white dusty road; or to wander again to the river as he had done in childhood. To be sure he did not send forth twigships any longer, but his thoughts would in spite of himself, stray down river to Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world—and poor home-tied John Redding wanted to follow them.

He grew silent and pensive. Matty accounted for this by her ever-ready explanation of “conjugation.” Alfred said nothing but smoked and puttered about the barn more than ever. Stella accused her husband of indifference and made his life miserable with tears, accusations and pouting. At last John decided to bring matters to a head and broached the subject to his wife.

“Stella, dear, I want to go roving about the world for a spell. Would you stay here with papa and mama and wait for me to come back?”

“John, is you crazy sho* nuff ? If you don’t want me, say so an* I kin go home to mah folks.”

“Stella, darling, I do want you, but I want to go away too. I can have both if you’ll let me. We’ll be so happy when I return. . .”

“Naw, John, you cain’t rush me off one side like that. You didn’t hafta marry me. There’s a plenty othahs that would have been glad enuff tuh get me; you know Ah wan’t educated befo’ han’.”

“Don’t make me too conscious of my weakness, Stella. I know I should never have married with my inclinations, but it’s done now, no use to talk about what is past. I love you and want to keep you, but I can’t stifle that longing for the open road, rolling seas, for peoples and countries I have never seen. I’m suffering too, Stella, I’m paying for my rashness in marrying before I was ready. I’m not trying to shirk my duty—you’ll be well taken care of in the meanwhile.”

“John, folks alius said youse queer and tol’ me not to marry yuh, but Ah jes’ loved yuh so Ah couldn’t help it, an’ now to think you wants tuh sneak off an’ leave me.”

"But I'm coming back, darling . . . listen Stella."

But the girl would not. Matty came in and Stella fell into her arms weeping. John's mother immediately took up arms against him. The two women carried on such an effective war against him for the next few days that finally Alfred was forced to take his son's part.

"Matty, let dat boy alone, Ah tell you! Ef he wuz uh hembuddy he'd be drove 'way by you all's racket."

"Well, Alf., dat's all we po' wimmen kin do. We wants our husbands an' our sons. John's got uh wife now, an' he ain't got no business to be talkin' 'bout goin' nowheres. I lowed dat marrin' Stella would settle him."

"Yas, dat's all you wimmen study 'bout—settlin' some man. You takes all de get-up out of 'em. Jes' let uh fellah mak uh motion lak gettin' somewhere, an' some 'oman'll begin tuh hollah 'Stop theah! where's you goin'? Don't fuhgit you b'longs tuh me.' "

"My Gawd! Alf! Whut you reckon Stella's gwine do? Let John walk off an' leave huh?"

"Naw, git outer huh foolishness an' go 'long wid him. He'd take huh."

"Stellah ain't got no call tuh go crazy 'cause John is. She ain't no woman tuh be floppin' roun' from place tuh place lak some uh dese reps foilerin' uh section gang."

The man turned abruptly from his wife and stood in the kitchen door. A blue haze hung over the river and Alfred's attention seemed fixed upon this. In reality his thoughts were turned inward. He was thinking of the numerous occasions upon which he and his son had sat on the fallen log at the edge of the water and talked of John's proposed travels. He had encouraged his son, given him every advantage his own poor circumstances would permit. And now John was home-tied.

The young man suddenly turned the corner of the house and approached his father.

“Hello, papa.”

“ ‘Lo, son.”

“Where’s mama and Stella?”

The older man merely jerked his thumb toward the interior of the house and once more gazed pensively toward the river. John entered the kitchen and kissed his mother fondly.

“Great news, mamma.’ ”

“What now?”

“Got a chance to join the Navy, mama, and go all around the world. Ain’t that grand?”

“John, you shorely ain’t gointer leave me an’ Stella, is yuh?”

“Yes, I think I am. I know how both of you feel, but I know how *I* feel, also. You preach to me the gospel of self-sacrifice for the happiness of others, but you are unwilling to practice any of it yourself. Stella can stay here—I am going to support her and spend all the time I can with her. I am going—that’s settled, but I want to go with your good will. I want to do something worthy of a strong man. I have done nothing so far but look to you and papa for everything. Let me learn to strive and think—in short, be a man.”

“Naw, John, Ah’ll nevah give mah consent. I know yous hard-headed jes’l-ak yo’ paw; but if you leave dis place ovah mah head, Ah nevah wants you tuh come back heah no mo. Ef Ah wuz laid on de coolin’ board, Ah doan want yuh standin* ovah me, young man. Doan even come neah mah grave, you ongrateful wretch!”

Mrs. Redding arose and flung out of the room. For once, she was too incensed to cry. John stood in his tracks, gone cold and numb at his mother’s pronouncement. Alfred, too, was moved. Mrs. Redding banged the bed-room door violently and startled John slightly. Alfred took his son’s arm, saying softly: ‘Come, son, let’s go down to the river.’”

At the water's edge they halted for a short space before seating themselves on the log. The sun was setting in a purple cloud. Hundreds of mosquito hawks darted here and there, catching gnats and being themselves caught by the lightning-swift bull-Kats. John abstractly snapped in two the stalk of a slender young bamboo. Taking no note of what he was doing, he broke it into short lengths and tossed them singly into the stream. The old man watched him silently for a while, but finally he said: "Oh, yes, my boy, some ships get tangled in the weeds."

"Yes papa they certainly do. I guess I'm beaten —might as well surrender."

"Nevah say die. Yuh nevah kin tell what will happen."

"What *can* happen? I have courage enough to make things happen; but what can I do against mamma! What man wants to go on a long journey with his mother's curses ringing in his ears? She doesn't understand. I'll wait another year, but I am going because I must."

Alfred threw an arm about his son's neck and drew him nearer but quickly removed it. Both men instantly drew apart, ashamed for having been so demonstrative. The father looked off to the woodlot and asked with a reminiscent smile: "Son, do you remember showin' me the tree dat looked lak a skeleton head?"

"Yes, I do. It's there still. I look at it sometimes when things have become too painful for me at the house, and I run down here to cool off and think. And every time I look at it, papa, it laughs at me like it had some grim joke up its sleeve."

"Yuh wuz always imagin' things, John; things that nobody else evah thought on!"

"You know, papa, sometimes—I reckon my longing to get away makes me feel this way. ... I feel that I am just earth, *soil* lying helpless to move myself, but *thinking*. I seem to hear herds of big beasts like horses and cows thundering over me, and rains beating down; and winds sweeping furiously over—all acting upon me, but me, well, just soil, *feeling* but not able to take part in it all. Then a soft wind like love passes over and warms me, and a

summer rain comes down like understanding and softens me, and I push a blade of grass or a flower, or maybe a pine tree—that's the ground thinking. Plants are ground thoughts, because the soil can't move itself. Whenever I see little whirls of dust sailing down the road I always step aside—I don't want to stop 'em 'cause they're on their shining way —moving! Oh, yes, I'm a dreamer. ... I have such wonderfully complete dreams, papa. They never come true. But even as my dreams fade I have others."

"Yas, son, Ah have them same feelings exactly, but Ah can't find no words lak you do. It seems lak you an' me see wid de same eyes, hear wid de same cars an' even feel de same inside. Only thing you kin talk it an' Ah can't. But anyhow you speaks for me, so whut's the difference?"

The men arose without more conversation. Possibly they feared to trust themselves to speech. As they walked leisurely toward the house Alfred remarked the freshness of the breeze.

'It's about time the rains set in," added his son. "The year is wcarin' on."

After a gloomy supper John strolled out into the spacious front yard and seated himself beneath a China-berry tree. The breeze had grown a trifle stronger since sunset and continued from the southeast. Matty and Stella sat on the deep front porch, but Alfred joined John under the tree. The family was divided into two armed camps and the hostilities had reached that stage where no quarter could be asked or given.

About nine o'clock an automobile came flying down the dusty white road and halted at the gate. A white man slammed the gate and hurried up the walk toward the house, but stopped abruptly before the men beneath the China-berry. It was Mr. Hill, the bulider of the new bridge that was to span the river.

Howdy John, Howdy Alf. I'm mighty glad I found you. I am in trouble."

'Well now, Mist' Hill," answered Alfred slowly but pleasantly. "We'se glad you foun' us too. What trouble could *you* be having now?"

“It’s the bridge. The weather bureau says that the rains will be upon me in forty-eight hours. If it catches the bridge as it is now, I’m afraid all my work of the past five months will be swept away, to say nothing of a quarter of a million dollars worth of labor and material. I’ve got all my men at work now and I thought to get as many extra hands as I could to help out tonight and tomorrow. We can make her weather tight in that time if I can get about twenty more.”

‘I’ll go, Mister Hill,’ said John with a great deal of energy. ‘I don’t want papa cut on that bridge—too dangerous.’

“Good for you, John!” cried the white man. “Now if I had a few more men of your brawn and brain, I could build an entirely new bridge in fortyeight hours. Come on and jump into the car. I am taking the men on down as I find them.”

“Wait a minute. I must put on my blue jeans. I won’t be long.”

John arose .and strode to the house. He knew that his mother and wife had overheard everything, but he paused for a moment to speak to them.

“Mamma,” I am going to work all night on the bridge.”

There was no answer. He turned to his wife.

“Stella, don’t be lonesome. I will be home at day-break.”

His wife was as silent as his mother. John stood for a moment on the steps, then resolutely strode past the women and into the house. A few minutes later he emerged clad in his blue overalls and brogans. This time he said nothing to the silent figures rocking back and forth on the porch. But when he was a few feet from the steps he called back: “Bye, mamma; bye, Stella,” and hurried on down the walk to where his father sat.

“So long, papa. I’ll be home around seven.”

Alfred roused himself and stood. Placing both hands upon his son’s broad shoulders he said softly: “Be keerful son, don’t fall or nothin’.”

“I will, papa. Don’t *you* get into a quarrel on my account.”.

John hurried on to the waiting car and was whirled away.

Alfred sat for a long time beneath the tree where his son had left him and smoked on. The women soon went indoors. On the night breeze were borne numerous scents: of jessamine, of roses, of damp earth of the river, of the pine forest near by. A solitary whip-poor-will sent forth his plaintive call from the nearby shrubbery. A giant cwl roared and boomed from the wood lot. The calf confined in the barn would bleat and be answered by his mother’s sympathetic “moo” from the pen. Away down in Lake Howell Creek the basso profundo of the alligators boomed and died, boomed and died.

Around ten o’clock the breeze freshened, growing stiffer until midnight when it became a gale. Alfred fastened the doors and bolted the wooden shutters at the windows. The three persons sat about a round deal table in the kitchen upon which stood a bulky kerosene lamp, flickering and sputtering in the wind that came in through the numerous cracks in the walls. The wind rushed down the chimney blowing puffs of ashes about the room. It banged the cooking utensils on the walls. The drinking gourd hanging outside by the door played a weird tattoo, hollow and unearthly, against the thin wooden wall.

The man and the women sat silently. Even if there had been no storm they would not have talked. They could not go to bed because the women were afraid to retire during a storm and the man wished to stay awake and think with his son. Thus they sat: the women hot with resentment toward the man and terrified by the storm; the man hardly mindful of the tempest but eating his heart out in pity for his boy. Time wore heavily on.

And now a new element of terror was added. A screech-owl alighted on the roof and shivered forth his doleful cry. Possibly he had been blown out of his nest by the wind. Matty started up at the sound but fell back in her chair, pale and trembling: “My Gawd!” she gasped, “dat’s a sho’ sign uh death.”

Stella hurriedly thrust her hand into the salt-jar and threw some into the chimney of the lamp. The color of the flame changed from yellow to blue-

green but this burning of salt did not have the desired effect—to drive away the bird from the roof. Matty slipped out of her blue calico wrapper and turned it wrong side out before replacing it. Even Alfred turned one sock.

“Alf,” said Matty, “What do you reckon’s gonna happen from this?”

“How do Ah know, Matty?”

“Ah wisht John hadn’t went way from heah tuh night.”

“Humh.”

Outside the tempest raged. The palms rattled dryly and the giant pines groaned and sighed in the grip of the wind. Flying leaves and pine-mast filled the air. Now and then a brilliant flash of lightning disclosed a bird being blown here and there with the wind. The prodigious roar of the thunder seemed to rock the earth. Black clouds hung so low that the tops of the pines were among them moving slowly before the wind and made the darkness awful. The screech owl continued his tremulous cry.

After three o’clock the wind ceased and the rain commenced. Huge drops clattered down upon the shingle roof like buckshot and ran from the eaves in torrents. It entered the house through the cracks in the walls and under the doors. It was a deluge in volume and force but subsided before morning.

The sun came up brightly on the havoc of the wind and rain calling forth millions of feathered creatures. The white sand everywhere was full of tiny cups dug out by the force of the falling raindrops. The rims of the little depressions crunched noisily underfoot.

At daybreak Mr. Redding set out for the bridge. He was uneasy. On arriving he found that the river had risen twelve feet during the cloudburst and was still rising. The slow St. Johns was swollen far beyond its banks and rushing on to sea like a mountain stream, sweeping away houses, great blocks of earth, cattle, trees—in short anything that came within its grasp. Even the steel framework of the new bridge was gone!

The siren of the fibre factory was tied down for half an hour, announcing the disaster to the country side. When Alfred arrived therefore he found nearly all the men of the district there.

The river, red and swollen, was full of floating debris. Huge trees were swept along as relentlessly as chicken coops and fence rails. Some steel piles were all that was left of the bridge.

Alfred went down to a group of men who were fishing members of the ill-fated construction gang out of the water. Many were able to swim ashore unassisted. Wagons backed up and were hurriedly driven away loaded with wet shivering men. Two men had been killed outright, others seriously wounded. Three men had been drowned. At last all had been accounted for except John Redding. His father ran here and there asking for him, or calling him. No one knew where he was. No one remembered seeing him since daybreak.

Dozens of women had arrived at the scene of the disaster by this time. Matty and Stella, wrapped in woolen shawls, were among them. They rushed to Alfred in alarm and asked where was John.

“Ah doan know,” answered Alfred impatiently. “That’s what Ah’m trying to fin’ out now.”

“Do you reckon he’s run away?” asked Stella thoughtlessly.

Matty bristled instantly.

“Naw,” she answered sternly, “he ain’t no sneak.”

The father turned to Fred Mimms, one of the survivors and asked him where John was and how had the bridge been destroyed.

“Yuh see,” said Mimms, “when dat turrible win’ come up we wuz out ’bout de middle of de river. Some of us wuz on de bridge, some on de derrick. De win’ blotfed so hahd we could skeercely stan’ and Mist’ Hill tol’ us tuh set down fuh a spell. He’s ’fraid some of us mought go overboard. Den all of a sudden de lights went out—guess de wires wuz blowed down. We wuz all

skecred tuh move for slippin' overboard. Den dat rain commenced— an' Ah nevah seed such a down-pour since de flood. We set dere and someone begins tuh pray. Lawd how we did pray tuh be spared! Den somebody raised a song an' we sung, you hear me, we sung from de bottom of our hearts till daybreak. When the first light come we couldn't see nothin' but fog everywhere. You couldn't tell which wuz water an' which wuz lan'." But when de sun come up de fog begin to liff, an' we could see de water. Dat fog wuz so thick an' heavy dat it wuz huggin' dat river lak a windin' sheet. And when it rose we saw dat de river had rose way up durin' the rain. My Gawd, Alf! it wuz runnin' high—so high it nearly teched de span of de bridge—an' red as blood! So much clay, you know from lan' she done overflowed. Cornin' down stream, as fas' as 'press train wuz three big pine trees. De first one wuzn't fchty feet from us and there wasn't no chance to do nothin' but pray. De fust one struck us and shook de whole works an' befo' it could stop shakin' the other two hit us an' down we went. Ah thought Ah'd never see home again."

"But, Mimms, where's John?"

'Ah ain't seen him, Alf, since de logs struck us. Mebbe he's swum ashore, mebbe dey picked him up. What's dat floatin' way out dere in de water?"

Alfred shaded his eyes with his gnarled brown hand and gazed out into the stream. Sure enough there was a man floating on a piece of timber. He lay prone upon his back. His arms were outstretched, and the water washed over his brogans but his feet were lifted out of the water whenever the timber was buoyed up by the stream. His blue overalls were nearly torn from his body. A heavy piece of steel or timber had struck him in falling for his left side was laid open by the thrust. A great jagged hole wherein the double fists of a man might be thrust, could plainly be seen from the shore. The man was John Redding.

Everyone seemed to see him at once. Stella fell to the wet earth in a faint. Matty clung to her husband's arm, weeping hysterically. Alfred stood very erect with his wife clinging tearfully to him, but he said nothing. A single tear hung on his lashes for a time then trickled slowly down his wrinkled brown cheek.

“Alf! Alf!” screamed Matty, “Dere’s our son. Ah knowed when Ah heard dat owl las’ night. . . .”

“Ah see ’im, Matty,” returned her husband softly. “Why is yuh standin’ heah ? Go git mah boy.” The men were manning a boat to rescue the remains of John Redding when Alfred spoke again.

“Mah po’ boy, his dreams never come true.”

“Alf,” complained Matty, “Why doantcher hurry an’ git my boy—doantcher see he’s floatin’ on off?”

Her husband paid her no attention but addressed himself to the rescue-party.

“You all stop! Leave my boy go on. Doan stop ’im. Doan’ bring ’im back for dat ole tree to grin at. Leave him g’wan. He wants tuh go. Ah’m happy ’cause dis mawnin’ mah boy is goin’ tuh sea, *hes goin tuh sea!*”*

Out on the bosom of the river, bobbing up and down as if waving good bye, piloting his little craft on the shining river road, John Redding floated away toward Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world— at last.

Muttsy

Opportunity Magazine - August, 1926

By Zora Neale Hursten

**Awarded One-half of Second Prize in Short Story Section—
Opportunity Contest**

THE piano in Ma Turner's back parlor stuttered and wailed. The pianist kept time with his heel and informed an imaginary deserter that "she might leave and go to Halimufack, but his slow-drag would bring her back," mournfully with a memory of tom-toms running rythm through the plaint.

Fewclothes burst through the portieres, a brown chrysalis from a dingy red cocoon, and touched the player on the shoulder.

"Say, Muttsy," he stage whispered, "Ma's got a new lil' biddy in there—just come. And say—her foot would make all of dese Harlem babies a Sunday face."

"Whut she look like?" Muttsy drawled, trying to maintain his characteristic pose of indifference to the female.

"Brown skin, patent leather grass on her knob, kinder tallish. She's a lil' skinny," he added apologetically, "but ah'm w'illing to buy corn for that lil' chicken."

Muttsy lifted his six feet from the piano bench as slowly as his curiosity would let him and sauntered to the portieres for a peep.

The sight was as pleasing as Fewclothes had stated—only more so. He w'ent on in the room which Ma always kept empty. It was her receiving room—her "front."

From Ma's manner it was evident that she was very glad to see the girl. She could see that the girl w^ras not overjoyed in her presence, but attributed that

to southern greenness.

“Who you say sentcher heah, dearie?” Ma asked, her face trying to beam, but looking harder and more forbidding.

“Uh-a-a man down at the boat landing where I got off—North River. 1 jus’ come in on the boat.” Ma’s husband from his corner spoke up.

“Musta been Bluefront.”

“Yeah, musta been him,” Muttsy agreed.

“Oh, it’s all right, honey, we New Yorkers likes to know who w^t’s^c takin’ in, dearie. We has to be keerful. Whut did you say yo’ name w’as?”

“Pinkie, yes, mam, Pinkie Jones.”

Ma stared hard at the little old battered reticule that the girl carried for luggage—not many clothes if that w[?]as all—she reflected. But Pinkie had everything she needed in her face—many, many trunks full. Several of them for Ma. She noticed the cold-reddened knuckles of her bare hands too.

, Come on upstairs to yo room—thass all right bout the price—we 11 come to some ’greement tomorrow. Jes’ go up and take off yo’ things.’

Pinkie put back the little rusty leather purse of another generation and followed Ma. She didn’t like Ma her smile resembled the smile of the Wolf in Red Riding Hood. Anyway back in Eatonville, Florida, “ladies,” especially old ones, didn’t put powder and paint on the face.

“Forty-dollars-Kate sure landed a pippin’ dis time,” said Muttsy, sotto voce, to Fewclothes back at the piano.” “If she ain’t, then there ain’t a hound daw’k in Georgy. Ah’m goin’ home an’ dress.”

No one else in the crowded back parlor let alone the house knew of Pinkie’s coming. They danced on, played on, sang their “blues” and lived on hotly their intense lives. The two men who had seen her—no one counted ole man Turner—went on playing too, but kept an ear cocked for her coming.

She followed Ma downstairs and seated herself in the parlor with the old man. He sat in a big rocker before a copper-lined gas stove, indolence in every gesture.

“Ah’m Ma’s husband,” he announced by way of making conversation.

“Now^r you jus’ shut up!” Ma commanded severely. “You gointer git yo’ teeth knocked dow^rn yo’ throat yit for runnin’ yo’ tongue. Lemme talk to dis gal—dis is *mah* house. You sets on the stool un do nothin’ too much tuh have anything tuh talk over!”

“Oh, Law’d,” groaned the old man feeling a knee that always pained him at the mention of work. “Oh, Lawd, will you sen’ yo’ fiery chariot an’ take me \way from heah?”

“Aw shet up!” the woman spit out. “Law’d don’t W’antcher—devil wouldn’t have yuh.” She peered into the girls face and leaned back satisfied.

“Well, girlie, you kin be a lotta help tuh me ’round dis house if you takes un intrus’ in things —oh Lawd!” She leaped up from her seat. “That’s mah bread ah smell burnin! . . .”

No sooner had Ma’s feet cleared the room than the old man came to life again. He peered furtively after the broad back of his wife.

“Know w^ho she is,” he asked Pinkie in an awed whisper. She shook her head. “You don’t? Dat’s Forty-dollars-Kate!”

“Forty-dollars-Kate?” Pinkie repeated open eyed.

“Naw, I don’t know nothin* ’bout her.”

“Sh-h” cautioned the old man. “Course you don’t. I fuhgits you aint nothin’ tall but a young ’un. Twenty-five years ago they all called her dat ’cause she wuz ‘Forty-dollars-Kate.’ She sho’ w^ruz some p’utty ’oman—great big robus’ lookin’ gal. Men wuz glad ’nough to spend forty dollars on her if dey had it. She didn’t lose no time wid dem dat didn’t have it.”

He grinned ingratiatingly at Pinkie and leaned nearer.

“But you’s better lookin’ than she ever wuz, you

might—taint no tellin’ whut you might do ef you git some sense. I’m a gointer teach you, hear?”

“Yessuh,” the girl managed to answer with an almost paralyzed tongue.

“Thass a good girl. You jus’ lissen to me an’ you’ll pull thew alright.”

He glanced at the girl sitting timidly upon the edge of the chair and scolded.

“Don’t set dataway,” he ejaculated. “Yo’ back hone ain’t no ram rod. Kinda scooch down on the for’ard edge uh de cheat lak dis.” (He demonstrated by “scooching” forward so far that he was almost sitting on his shoulder-blades.) The girl slumped a trifle.

“Is you got a job yit?”

“Nawsuh,” she answered slowly, “but I reckon I’ll have one soon. Ain’t been in town a day yet.”

“You looks kinda young—kinda little biddy. Is you been to school much ?”

“Yessuh, went thew^T eight reader. I’m goin’ again when I get a chance.”

“Dat so? Well ah reckon ah kin talk some Latin tuh yuh den.” He cleared his throat loudly. “Whut’s you entitlum?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl in confusion.

“Well, den, whut’s you entrimmins,” he queried with a bit of braggadocia in his voice.

“I don’t know,” from the girl, after a long awkward pause.

“You chillun don’t learn nothin’ in school dese days. Is you got to “goes into” yit?”

“You mean long division?”

“Ain’t askin’ ’bout de longness of it, dat don’t make no difference,” he retorted, “Sence you goin’ stay heah ah’ll edgocate yuh—do yuh know how to eat a fish—uh nice brown fried fish?”

“Yessuh,” she answered quickly, looking about for the fish.

“How ?”

“Why, you jus’ eat it with corn bread,” she said, a bit disappointed at the non-appearance of the fish.

“Well, ah’ll tell yuh,” he patronized. “You starts at de tail and liffs de meat off de bones sorter gentle and eats him clear tuh de head on dat side; den you turn ’im ovah an’ commence at de tail agin and eat right up tuh de head ; den you push **dem** bones way tuh one side an’ takes another fish an’ so on ’till de end—well, ’till der ain’t no mo’!”

He mentally digested the fish and went on. “See,” he pointed accusingly at her feet, “sou don’t even know how tuh warm yoself! You settin’ dere wid yo’ feet ev’y which a way. Dat ain’t de way tuh git wahm. Now look at **mah** feet. Dass right put bofe big toes right togethah—now shove ’em close up tuh de fiah; now lean back so! Dass de way. Ah knows uh heap uh things tuh teach yuh sense you gointer live heah—ah learns all of ’em while de ole lady is paddlin’ roun’ out dere in de yard.”

Ma appeared at the door and the old man withdrew so far into his rags that he all but disappeared. They went to supper where there was fried fish but forgot all rules for eating it and just ate heartily. She helped with the dishes and returned to the parlor. A little later some more men and women knocked and were admitted after the same furtive peering out through the nearest crack of the door. Ma carried them all back to the kitchen and Pinkie heard the clink of glasses and much loud laughter.

Women came in by ones and twos, some in shabby coats turned up about the ears, and with various cheap but showy hats crushed down over

unkempt hair. More men, more women, more trips to the kitchen with loud laughter.

Pinkie grew uneasy. Both men and women stared at her. She kept strictly to her place. Ma came in and tried to make her join the others.

“Come on in, honey, a lil’ toddy ain’t gointer hurt nobody. Evebody knows *me*, ah wouldn’t touch a hair on yo’ head. Come on in, dearie, all th’ men wants tuh meetcher.”

Pinkie smelt the liquor on Ma’s breath and felt contaminated at her touch. She wished herself back home again even with the ill treatment and squalor. She thought of the three dollars she had secreted in her shoe—she had been warned against pickpockets—and flight but where? Nowhere. For there was no home to which *she* could return, nor any place else she knew of. But when she got a job, she’d scrape herself clear of people who took toddies.

A very black man sat on the piano stool playing as only a Negro can with hands, stamping with his feet and the rest of his body keeping time.

“Ahm gointer make me a graveyard of mah own Ahm gointer make me a graveyard of mah own Carried me down on de smoky Road”—

Pinkie, weary of Ma’s maudlin coaxing caught these lines as she was being pulled and coaxed into the kitchen. Everyone in there was shaking shimmies to music, rolling eyes heavenward as they picked imaginary grapes out of the air, or drinking. “Folkes,” shouted Ma, “Look a heah! Shut up dis racket! Ah wantcher tuh meet Pinkie Jones. She’s de bes’ frien’ ah got.” Ma flopped into a chair and began to cry into her whiskey glass.

“Mah comperments!” The men almost shouted. The women were less, much less enthusiastic.

“Dass de las’ run uh shad,” laughed a woman called Ada, pointing to Pinkie’s slenderness.

“Jes* lak a bar uh soap aftah uh hard week’s wash,” Bertha chimed in and laughed uproariously. The men didn’t help.

“Oh, Miss Pinkie,” said Bluefront, removing hi; Stetson for the first time, “Ma’am, also Ma’am, ef you wuz tuh see me settin’ straddle of uh Mud-cat leadin’ a minner whut ud you think?”

“1-er, oh, I don’t know, suh. I didn’t know you-er anybody could ride uh fish.”

“Stick uh roun’ me, baby, an’ you’ll wear dia-mon’s.” Bluefront swaggered. “Look heah, lil’ Pigmeat, youse **some** sharp! If you didn’t had but one eye ah’d think you wuz a needle—thass how sharp you looks to me. Say, mah right foot is itchin’. Do dat mean ah’m gointer walk on some strange ground wid you?”

“Naw, indeedy,” cut in Fewclothes. “It jes’ means you feet needs to walk in some strange water —wid a lif read seal lye thowed in.

But he was not to have a monopoly. Fewclothes and Shorty joined the chase and poor Pinkie found it impossible to retreat to her place beside the old man. She hung her head, embarrassed that she did did not understand their mode of speech; she felt the unfriendly eyes of the women, and she loathed the smell of liquor that filled the house now. The piano still rumbled and wailed that same song— “Carried me down on de Smoky Road

Brought me back on de coolin’ board

Ahm gointer make me a graveyard of mah own.”

A surge of cold, fresh air from the outside stirred the smoke and liquor fumes and Pinkie knew that the front door was open. She turned her eyes that way and thought of flight to the clean outside. The door stood wide open and a tall figure in an overcoat with a fur collar stood there.

“Good Gawd, Muttsy! Shet ’at do’,” cried Shorty. “Dass a pure razor blowing out dere tonight. Ah didn’t know you wuz outa here nohow.”

“Carried me down on de Smoky Road

Brought me back on de coolin’ board

Ahm gointer make me a graveyard of mah own,” sang Muttsy, looking as if he sought someone and banged the door shut on the last words. He strode on in without removing hat or coat.

Pinkie saw in this short space that all the men deferred to him, that all the women sought his notice. She tried timidly to squeeze between two of the men and return to the quiet place beside old man Turner, thinking that Muttsy would hold the attention of her captors until she had escaped. But Muttsy spied her through the men about her and joined them. By this time her exasperation and embarrassment had her on the point of tears.

“Well, whadda yuh know about dis!” he exclaimed, “A real lil’ pullet.”

“Look out dere, Muttsy,” drawled Dramsleg with objection, catching Pinkie by the arm and trying to draw her toward him. “Lemme tell dis lil’ Pink Mama how crazy ah is ’bout her mahself. Ah ain’t got no lady atall an’—”

“Aw, shut up Drains,” Muttsy said sternly, “put yo’ pocketbook where yo’ mouf is, an’ somebody will lissen. Ah’m a heavy-sugar papa. Ah eats fried chicken when the rest of you niggers is drinking rain water.”

He thrust some of the others aside and stood squarely before her. With her downcast eyes, she saw his well polished shoes, creased trousers, gloved hands and at last timidly raised her eyes to his face.

“Look a heah!” he frowned, “you roughnecks done got dis baby ready tuh cry.”

He put his forefinger under her chin and made her look at him. And for some reason he removed his hat.

“Come on in the sittin’ room an’ Ie’s talk. Come on befo’ some uh dese niggers sprinkle some salt on yuh and eat juh clean up lak uh radish.” Dramsleg looked after Muttsy and the girl as they swam through the smoke into the front room. He beckoned to Bluefront.

“Hey, Bluefront! Ain’t you mah fren’?”

“Yep,” answered Bluefront.

“Well, then why cain’t you help me? Muttsy done done me dirt wid the lil’ pig-meat—throw a louse on ’im.”

Pinkie’s hair was slipping down. She felt it, but her selfconsciousness prevented her catching it and down it fell in a heavy roll that spread out and covered her nearly to the waist. She followed Muttsy into the front room and again sat shrinking in the corner. She did not wish to talk to Muttsy nor anyone else in that house, but there were fewer people in this room.

“Phew!” cried Bluefront, “dat baby sho got some righteous moss on her keg—dass reg’lar ‘nearrow mah Gawd tuh thee’ stuff.” He made a lengthy gesture with his arms as if combing out long, silky hair.

“Shux,” sneered Ada in a moist, alcoholic voice. “Dat ain’t nothin’ mah haih useter be so’s ah could set on it.”

There was general laughter from the men.

“Yas, ah know it’s de truth!” shouted Shorty. “It’s jes’ ez close tuh yo’ head *now* ez ninety-nine is tuh uh hund’ed.”

“Ah’ll call Muttsy tuh you.” Ada threatened.

“Oh, ’oman, Muttsy ain’t got you tuh study ’bout no mo’ cause he’s parkin’ his heart wid dat lil’ chicken wid white-folks’ haih. Why, dat lil’ chicken’s foot would make you a Sunday face.”

General laughter again. Ada dashed the whiskey glass upon the floor with the determined stalk of an angry tiger and arose and started forward.

“Muttsy Owens, uh nobody else ain’t to gointer make no fool outer *me*. Dat lil’ kack girl ain’t gointer put *me* on de bricks—not much.”

Perhaps Muttsy heard her, perhaps he saw her out of the corner of his eye and read her mood. But knowing the woman as he did he might have known what she would do under such circumstances. At any rate he got to his feet as she entered the room where he sat with Pinkie.

“Ah know you ain’t lost yo’ head sho’ ’nuff, ’oman. ’Deed, Gawd knows you bettah go ’way f’um me.” He said this in a low, steady voice. The music stopped, the talking stopped and even the drinkers paused. Nothing happened, for Ada looked straight into Muttsy’s eyes and went on outside.

“Miss Pinkie, Ah votes you g’wan tuh bed,” Muttsy said suddenly to the girl.

“Yes-suh.”

“An’ don’t you worry ’bout no job. Ah knows where you kin git a good one. Ah’ll go see em first an’ tell yuh tomorrow night.”

She went off to bed upstairs. The rich baritone of the pianoplayer came up to her as did laughter and shouting. But she was tired and slept soundly.

Ma shuffled in after eight the next morning. “Darlin’, ain’t you got ’nuff sleep yit?”

Pinkie opened her eyes a trifle. “Ain’t you the puttiest lil’ trick! An’ Muttsy done gone crazy

’bout yuh! Chile, he’s lousy wid money an’ dia-mon’s an’ everything—Yuh better grab him quick. Some folks has all de luck. Heah ah is—got uh man dat hates work lak de devil hates holy water. Ah gotta make dis house pay!”

Pinkie’s eyes opened wide. “What does Mr. Muttsy do?”

“Mah Gawd, chile! He’s de bes’ gambler in three states, cards, craps un hawses. He could be a boss stevedore if he so wanted. The big boss down on de dock would give him a fat job—just begs him to take it cause he can manage the men. He’s the biggest hero they got since Harry Wills left the waterfront. But he won’t take it cause he makes so much wid the games.”

“He’s awful good-lookin,” Pinkie agreed, “an’ he been mighty nice tuh me—but I like men to work. I wish he would. Gamblin’ ain’t nice.”

“Yeah, ’tis, ef you makes money lak Muttsy. Maybe yo ain’t noticed dat diamon’ set in his tooth. He picks women up when he wants tuh an’ puts ’em down when he choose.”

Pinkie turned her face to the wall and shuddered. Ma paid no attention.

“You doan hafta git up till you git good an’ ready, Muttsy says. Ah mean you kin stay roun’ the house ’till you come to, sorter.”

Another day passed. Its darkness woke up the land east of Lenox—all that land between the railroad tracks and the river. It was very ugly by day, and night kindly hid some of its sordid homeliness. Yes, nigh time gave it life.

The same women, or others just like them, came to Ma Turner’s. The same men, or men just like them, came also and treated them to liquor or mistreated them with fists or cruel jibes. Ma got half drunk as usual and cried over everyone who would let her.

Muttsy came alone and went straight to Pinkie where she sat trying to shrink into the wall. She had feared that he would not come.

“Howdy do, Miss Pinkie.”

“How’do do, Mistah Owens,” she actually achieved a smile. “Did you see bout m’job?”

“Well, yeah—but the lady says she won’t needya fuh uh week yet. Doan’ worry. Ma ain’t gointer push yuh foh room rent. Mah wrist ain’t got no cramps.”

Pinkie half sobbed: “Ah wantsa job now!”

“Didn’t ah say dass alright? Well, Muttsy doan lie. Shux! Ah might jes’ es well tell yuh—ahm crazy ’bout yuh—money no objeck.”

It was the girl herself who first mentioned “bed” this night. He suffered her to go without protest.

The next night she did not come into the sitting room. She went to bed as soon as the dinner things had been cleared. Ma begged and cried, but Pinkie pretended illness and kept to her bed. This she repeated the next night and the next. Every night Muttsy came and every night he added to his sartorial splendor; but each night he went away, disappointed, more evidently crestfallen than before.

But the insistence for escape from her strange surroundings grew on the girl. When Ma was busy elsewhere, she would take out the three one dollar bills from her shoe and reconsider her limitations. If that job would only come on! She felt shut in, imprisoned, walled in with these women who talked of nothing but men and the numbers and drink, and men who talked of nothing but the numbers and drink and women. And desperation took her.

One night she was still waiting for the job— Ma's alcoholic tears prevailed. Pinkie took a drink. She drank the stuff mixed with sugar and water and crept to bed even as the dizziness came on. She would not wake tonight. Tomorrow, maybe, the job would come and freedom.

The piano thumped but Pinkie did not hear; the shouts, laughter and cries did not reach her that night. Downstairs Muttsy pushed Ma into a corner,

“Looky heah, Ma. Dat girl done played me long enough. Ah pays her room rent, ah pays her boahd an’ all ah gets is uh hunk of ice. Now you said you wuz gointer fix things—you tole me so las’ night an’ heah she done gone tuh bed on me agin.”

“Deed, ah caint do nothin^ wid huh. She’s thinkin’ sho’ nuff you goin’ git her uh job and she fret so cause tain’t come, dat she drunk uh toddv un hits knocked her down jes lak uh log.”

“Ada an’ all uh them laffin—they say ah done crapped.” He felt injured. “Camt ah go talk to her?”

“Lawdy, Muttsy, dat gal dead drunk an’ sleepin’ lak she’s buried.”

“Well, caint ah go up an’—an* speak tuh her jus’ the same.” A yellow backed bill from Muttsy’s roll found itself in Ma’s hand and put her in such good humor that she let old man Turner talk all he wanted for the rest of the night.

“Yas, Muttsy, gwan in. Youse *mah* frien’.”

Muttsy hurried up to the room indicated. He felt shaky inside there with Pinkie, somehow, but he approached the bed and stood for awhile looking down upon her. Her hair in confusion about her face and swinging off the bedside; the brown arms revealed and the soft lips. He blew out the match he had struck and kissed her full in the mouth, kissed her several times and passed his hand over her neck and throat and then hungrily down upon her breast. But here he drew back.

“Naw,” he said sternly to himself, “ah ain’t goin’ ter play her wid no loaded dice.” Then quickly he covered her with the blanket to her chin, kissed her again upon the lips and tipped down into the darkness of the vestibule.

“Ah reckon ah bettah git married.” He soliloquized. “B’lieve me, ah will, an’ go uptown wid dicties.’

He lit a cigar and stood there on the steps puffing and thinking for some time. His name was called inside the sitting room several times but he pretended not to hear. At last he stole back into the room where slept the girl who unwittingly and unwillingly was making him do queer things. He tipped up to the bed again and knelt there holding her hands so fiercely that she groaned without waking. He watched her and he wanted her so that he wished to crush her in his love; crush and crush and hurt her against himself, but somehow he resisted the impulse and merely kissed her lips again, kissed her hands back and front, removed the largest diamond ring from his hand and slipped it on her engagement finger. It was much too large so he closed her hand and tucked it securely beneath the covers.

“She’s *mine!*” He said triumphantly. “All mine!”

He switched off the light and softly closed the door as he went out again to the steps. He had gone up to the bed room from the sitting room boldly,

caring not who knew that Muttsy Owens took what he wanted. He was stealing forth afraid that someone might *suspect* that he had been there. There is no secret love in those barrens; it is a thing to be approached boisterously and without delay or dalliance. One loves when one wills, and ceases when it palls. There is nothing sacred or hidden—all subject to coarse jokes. So Muttsy re-entered the sitting room from the steps as if he had been into the street.

“Where you been Muttsy?” whined Ada with an awkward attempt at coyness.

“What *you* wanta know for?” he asked roughly.

“Now, Muttsy you know you ain’t treatin’ me right, honey. How come you runnin’ de hawg ovah me lak you do?”

“Git outa mah face ’oman. Keep yo’ han’s offa me.” He clapped on his hat and strode from the house.

Pinkie awoke with a gripping stomach and thumping head.

Ma bustled in. “How yuh feelin’ darlin? Youse jes lak a li’l dol baby.”

“I got a headache, terrible from that ole whiskey. Thass mah first und las’ drink long as I live.” She felt the ring.

“Whut’s this?” she asked and drew her hand out to the light.

“Dat’s Muttsy’ ring. Ah seen him wid it fuh two years. How’d y’all make out? He sho is one thur’bred.”

“Muttsy? When? I didn’t see no Muttsy.”

“Dearie, you doan’ hafta tell yo’ bizniss ef you doan wanta. Ahm a hush-mouf. Thass all right, keep yo’ bizniss to yo’ self.” Ma bleared her eyes wisely. “But ah know Muttsy wuz up heah tub sec yuh las’ night. Doan’ mine *me*, honey, gwan wid ’im. He’ll treat yuh right. Ah *knows* he’s crazy ’bout yuh. An’ all de women is crazy ’bout *him*. Lawd! lookit dat ring!” Ma regarded it greedily for a long time, but she turned and walked toward the

door at last. “Git up darlin’. Ah got fried chicking fuh brckfus’ un mush melon.”

She went on to the kitchen. Ma’s revelation sunk deeper, then there was the ring. Pinkie hurled the ring across the room and leaped out of bed.

He ain t goin to make **me** none of his women— I’ll die first! I’m goin’ outa this house if I starve, Icmme starve!”

She got up and plunged her face into the cold water on the washstand in the corner and hurled herself into the shabby clothes, thrust the three dollars which she had never had occasion to spend, under the pillow where Ma would be sure to find them and slipped noiselessly out of the house and fled down Fifth Avenue toward the Park that marked the beginning of the Barrens. She did not know where she was going, and cared little so long as she removed herself as far as possible from the house where the great evil threatened her.

At ten o’clock that same morning, Muttsy Owens dressed his flashiest best, drove up to Ma’s door in a cab, the most luxurious that could be hired. He had gone so far as to stick two one hundred dollar notes to the inside of the windshield. Ma was overcome.

“Muttsy, dearie, what you doin’ heah so soon? Pinky sho has got you goin’. Un in a swell cab too—gee!”

“Ahm gointer git mah’ried tuh de doll baby, thass how come. An’ ahm gointer treat her white too.”

“Umhumh! Thass how come de ring! You oughtn’t never fuhgit me, Muttsy, fuh puttin’ y’all together. But ah never thought you’d mah’ry **nobody**—you alius said you wouldn’t.”

“An’ ah wouldn’t neither ef ah hadn’t of seen **her**. Where she is?”

“In de room dressin’. She never tole me nothin’ ’bout dis.”

“She doan* know. She wuz sleep when ah made up mah mind an’ slipped on de ring. But ah never miss no girl ah wants, you knows me.”

“Everybody in this man’s town knows you gets whut you wants.”

“Naw, ah come tuh take her to brek’fus ’fo we goes tuh de cote-house.”

“An’ y’all stay heah and eat wid me. You go call her whilst ah set de grub on table.”

Muttsy, with a lordly stride, went up to Pinkie’s deor and rapped and waited and rapped and waited three times. Growing impatient or thinking her still asleep, he Hung open the door and entered.

The first thing that struck him was the empty bed ; the next was the glitter of his diamond ring upon the floor. He stumbled out to Ma. She was gone, no doubt of that.

“She looked awful funny when ah tole her you wuz in heah, but ah thought she wuz puttin’ on airs,” Ma declared finally.

“She thinks ah played her wid a marked deck, but ah didn’t. Ef ah could see her she’d love me. Ah know she would. ’Cause ah’d make her,” Muttsy lamented.

“I don’t know, Muttsy. She ain’t no New Yorker, and she thinks gamblin’ is awful.”

“Zat all she got against me? Ah’ll fix that up in a minute. You help me find her and ah’ll do anything she says jus’ so she marries me.” He laughed ruefully. “Looks like ah crapped this time, don’t it, ma?”

The next day Muttsy was foreman of two hundred stevedores. How he did make them work.

But oh how cheerfully they did their best for him. The company begrudged not one cent of his pay. He searched diligently, paid money to other searchers, went every night to Ma’s to see if by chance the girl had returned or if any clues had turned up.

Two weeks passed this way. Black empty days for Muttsy.

Then he found her. He was coming home from work. When crossing Seventh Avenue at 135th Street they almost collided. He seized her and began pleading before she even had time to recognize him.

He turned and followed her; took the employment office slip from her hand and destroyed it, took her arm and held it. He must have been very convincing for at 125th Street they entered a taxi that headed uptown again. Muttsy was smiling amiably upon the whole round world.

A month later, as Muttsy stood on the dock hustling his men to greater endeavor, Bluefront flashed past with his truck. "Say, Muttsy, you don't know what you missin' since you quit de game. Ah cleaned out de whole bunch las' night." He flashed a roll and laughed. "It don't seem like a month ago you wuz king uh de bones in Harlem." He vanished down the gangplank into the ship's hold.

As he raced back up the gangplank with his loaded truck Muttsy answered him. "And now, I'm King of the Boncheads—which being interpreted means stevedores. Come on over behind dis crate wid yo' roll. Mah wrist ain't got no cramp 'cause ah'm married. You'sc gettin' too sassy."

"Thought you wuzn't gointer shoot no mo'!" Bluefront temporized.

"Aw Hell! Come on back heah," he said impatiently. "Ah'll shoot you any way you wants to—hard or soft roll—you'se trying to stall. You know ah don't crap neither. Come on, mah Pinkie needs a fur coat and you stevedores is got to buy it."

He was on his knees with Bluefront. There was a quick movement of Muttsy's wrist, and the cubes flew out on a piece of burlap spread for the purpose—a perfect seven.

"Hot dog!" he exulted. "Look at dem babies gallop!" His wrist quivered again. "Nine for point!" he gloated. "Hah!" There was another quick shake and nine turned up again. "Shove in, Bluefront, shove in dat roll, dese babies is crying fuh it."

Bluefront laid down two dollars grudgingly. “You said you wuzn’t gointer roll no mo’ dice after you got married,” he grumbled.

But Muttsy had tasted blood. His flexible wrist was already in the midst of the next play.

“Come on, Bluefront, stop bellyachin’. Ah shoots huy for de roll!” He reached for his own pocket and laid down a roll of yellow bills beside Bluefront’s. His hand quivered and the cubes skipped out again. “Nine!” He snapped his fingers like a trap-drum and gathered in the money.

“Doxology, Bluefront. Git back in de line wid yo’ truck an’ send de others roun’ heah one by one. What man can’t keep one li’l wife an’ two li’l bones? Hurry em up, Blue!”

Sweat

FIRE!! Magazine - November, 1926

By Zona Neale Hurston.

It was eleven o'clock of a Spring night in Florida.

It was Sunday. Any other night, Delia Jones would have been in bed for two hours by this time. But she was a washwoman, and Monday morning meant a great deal to her. So she collected the soiled clothes on Saturday when she returned the clean things. Sunday night after church, she sorted them and put the white things to soak. It saved her almost a half day's start. A great hamper in the bedroom held the clothes that she brought home. It was so much neater than a number of bundles lying around.

She squatted in the kitchen floor beside the great pile of clothes, sorting them into small heaps according to color, and humming a song in a mournful key, but wondering through it all where Sykes, her husband, had gone with her horse and buckboard.

Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her. A great terror took hold of her. It softened her knees and dried her mouth so that it was a full minute before she could cry out or move. Then she saw that it was the big bull whip her husband liked to carry when he drove.

She lifted her eyes to the door and saw him standing there bent over with laughter at her fright. She screamed at him.

"Sykes, what you throw dat whip on me like dat? You know it would skeer me—looks just like a snake, an' you knows how skeered Ah is of snakes."

"Course Ah knowed it! That's how come Ah done it." He slapped his leg with his hand and almost rolled on the ground in his mirth. "If you such a big fool dat you got to have a fit over a earth worm or a string, Ah don't keer how bad Ah skeer you."

“You aint got no business doing it. Gawd knows it’s a sin. Some day Ah’m gointuh drop dead from some of yo’ foolishness. ’Nother thing, where you been wid mah rig? Ah feeds dat pony. He aint fuh you to be drivin’ wid no bull whip.”

“You sho is one aggravatin’ nigger woman!” he declared and stepped into the room. She resumed her work and did not answer him at once. “Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks’ clothes outa dis house.”

He picked up the whip and glared down at her. Delia went on with her work. She went out into the yard and returned with a galvanized tub and sit it on the washbench. She saw that Sykes had kicked all of the clothes together again, and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, praying[^] for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things.

“Next time, Ah’m gointer kick ’em outdoors,” he threatened as he struck a match along the leg of his corduroy breeches.

Delia never looked up from her work, and her thin, stooped shoulders sagged further.

“Ah aint for no fuss t’night Sykes. Ah just come from taking sacrament at the church house.”

He snorted scornfully. “Yeah, you just come from de church house on a Sunday night, but heah you is gone to work on them clothes. You ain’t nothing but a hypocrite. One of them amen-corner Christians—sing, whoop, and shout, then come home and wash white folks clothes on the Sabbath.”

He stepped roughly upon the whitest pile of things, kicking them helter-skelter as he crossed the room. His wife gave a little scream of dismay, and quickly gathered them together again.

“Sykes, you quit grindin’ dirt into these clothes! How can Ah git through by Sat’day if Ah don’t start on Sunday?”

“Ah don’t keer if you never git through. Anyhow, Ah done promised Gawd and a couple of other men, Ah aint gointer have it in mah house. Don’t gimme no lip neither, else Ah’ll throw ’em out and put mah fist up side yo’ head to boot.”

Delia’s habitual meekness seemed to slip from her shoulders like a blown scarf. She was on her feet; her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands bravely defying the strapping hulk before her.

“Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur. Ah been married to you fur fifteen years, and Ah been takin’ in washin’ fur fifteen years. Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!”

“What’s that got to do with me ?” he asked brutally.

“What’s it got to do with you, Sykes? Mah tub of suds is filled yo’ belly with vittles more times than yo’ hands is filled it. Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it.”

She seized the iron skillet from the stove and struck a defensive pose, which act surprised him greatly, coming from her. It cowed him and he did not strike her as he usually did.

“Naw you won’t,” she panted, “that ole snaggletoothed black woman you runnin’ with aint cornin’ heah to pile up on *mah* sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin’ on this place, and Ah’m gointer stay right heah till Ah’m toted out foot foremost.”

“Well, you better quit gittin’ me riled up, else they’ll be totin’ you out sooner than you expect. Ah’m so tired of you Ah don’t know whut to do. Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen!”

A little awed by this new Delia, he sidled out of the door and slammed the back gate after him. He did not say where he had gone, but she knew too well. She knew very well that he would not return until nearly daybreak also. Her work over, she went on to bed but not to sleep at once. Things had come to a pretty pass!

She lay awake, gazing upon the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail. Not an image left standing along the way. Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood. She had brought love to the union and he had brought a longing after the flesh. Two months after the wedding, he had given her the first brutal beating. She had the memory of his numerous trips to Orlando with all of his wages when he had returned to her penniless, even before the first year had passed. She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands, and drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed. Too late now to hope for love, even if it were not Bertha it would be someone else. This case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. Too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely.

Somehow, before sleep came, she found herself saying aloud: "Oh well, whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly. Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing." After that she was able to build a spiritual earthworks against her husband. His shells could no longer reach her. *Amen*. She went to sleep and slept until he announced his presence in bed by kicking her feet and rudely snatching the cover away.

"Gimme some kivah heah, an' git yo' damn foots over on yo' own side! Ah oughter mash you in yo' mouf fuh drawing dat skillet on me."

Delia went clear to the rail without answering him. A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did. (CL-zr?)

The week was as full of work for Delia as all other weeks, and Saturday found her behind her little pony, collecting and delivering clothes.

It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke's porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane-knots as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat.

“Heah come Delia Jones,” Jim Merchant said, as the shaggy pony came ’round the bend of the road toward them. The rusty buckboard was heaped with baskets of crisp, clean laundry.

“Yep,” Joe Lindsay agreed. “Hot or col’, rain or shine, jes ez reg’lar ez de weeks roll roun’ Delia carries ’em an’ fetches ’em on Sat’d day.”

“She better if she wanten eat,” said Moss. “Syke Jones aint wuth de shot an’ powder hit would tek tuh kill ’em. Not to *huh* he aint.”

“He sho’ aint,” Walter Thomas chimed in. “It’s too bad, too, cause she wuz a right pritty lil trick when he got huh. Ah’d uh mah’ied huh mah-seff if he hadnter beat me to it.”

Delia nodded briefly at the men as she drove past.

“Too much knockin’ will ruin *any* ’oman. He done beat huh ’nough tuh kill three women, let ’lone change they looks,” said Elijah Mosely. “How Syke kin stommuck dat big black greasy Mogul he’s layin’ roun’ wid, gits me. Ah swear dat eight-rock couldn’t kiss a sardine can Ah done thowed out de back do’ ’way las’ yeah.”

“Aw, she’s fat, thass how come. He’s alius been crazy ’bout fat women,” put in Merchant. “He’d a’ been tied up wid one long time ago if he could a’ found one tuh have him. Did Ah tell yuh ’bout him come sidlin’ roun’ *mah* wife—bringin’ her a basket uh pee-cans outa his yard fuh a present? Yessir, mah wife! She tol’ him tuh take ’em right straight back home, cause Delia works so hard ovah dat washtub she reckon everything on de place taste lak sweat an’ soapsuds. Ah jus’ wisht Ah’d a’ caught ’im ’roun’ dere! Ah’d a’ made his hips ketch on fiah down dat shell road.”

“Ah know he done it, too. Ah sees ’im grinnin’ at every ’oman dat passes,” Walter Thomas said. “But even so, he useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil’ ’oman he got. She wuz ez pritty ez a speckled pup! Dat wuz fifteen yeahs ago. He useter be so skeered uh Iosin’ huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband’s duty. Dey never wuz de same in de mind.”

“There oughter be a law about him,” said Lindsay. He aint fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear.”

Clarke spoke for the first time. “Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in ’im. There’s plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It’s round, juicy an’ sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an’ grind, squeeze an’ grind an’ wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dat’s in ’em out. When dey’s satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats ’em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey thows ’em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin’ while dey is at it, an’ hates their-selves fuh it but they keeps on hangin’ after huh tell she’s empty. Den dey hates huh fuh bein’ a cane-chew an’ in de way.”

“We oughter take Syke an’ dat stray ’oman uh his’n down in Lake Howell swamp an’ lay on de rawhide till they cain’t say ‘Lawd a’ mussy.’ He alius wuz uh ovahbearin’ niggah, but since dat white ’oman from up north done taughted ’im how to run a automobile, he done got to biggety to live—an’ we oughter kill ’im.” Old Man Anderson advised.

A grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue and Elijah Moseley began to bait Joe Clarke.

“Come on, Joe, git a melon outa dere an’ slice it up for yo’ customers. We’s all sufferin’ wid de heat. De bear’s done got *me!*”

“Thass right, Joe, a watermelon is jes’ whut Ah needs tuh cure de eppizudicks,” Walter Thomas joined forces with Moseley. “Come on dere, Joe. We all is steady customers an’ you aint set us up in a long time. Ah chooses dat long, bowlegged Floridy favorite.”

“A god, an’ be dough You all gimme twenty cents and slice away,” Clarke retorted. “Ah needs a col’ slice m’self. Heah, everybody chip in. Ah’ll lend y’ll mah meat knife.”

The money was quickly subscribed and the huge melon brought forth. At that moment, Sykes and Bertha arrived. A determined silence fell on the porch and the melon was put away again.

Merchant snapped down the blade of his jackknife and moved toward the store door.

“Come on in, Joe, an’ gimme a slab uh sow belly an’ uh pound uh coffee—almost fuhgot ’twas Sat’-day. Got to git on home.” Most of the men left also.

Just then Delia drove past on her way home, as Sykes was ordering magnificently for Bertha. It pleased him for Delia to see.

“Git whutsoever yo’ heart desires, Honey. Wait a minute, Joe. Give huh two botles uh strawberry soda-water, uh quart uh parched ground-peas, an’ a block uh chewin’ gum.”

With all this they left the store, with Sykes reminding Bertha that this was his town and she could have it if she wanted it.

The men returned soon after they left, and held their watermelon feast.

“Where did Syke Jones git dat ’oman from nohow?” Lindsay asked.

“Ovah Apopka. Guess dey musta been cleanin’ out de town when she lef’. She don’t look lak a thing but a hunk uh liver wid hair on it.”

“Well, she sho’ kin squall,” Dave Carter contributed. “When she gits ready tuh laff, she jes’ opens huh mouf an’ latches it back tuh de las’ notch. No ole grandpa alligator down in Lake Bell ain’t got nothin’ on huh.”

Bertha had been in town three months now. Sykes was still paying her room rent at Della Lewis’ —the only house in town that would have taken her in. Sykes took her frequently to Winter Park to “stomps.” He still assured her that he was the swellest man in the state.

“Sho’ you kin have dat lil’ ole house soon’s Ah kin git dat ’onian outa dere. Everything b’longs tuh me an’ you sho’ kin have it. Ah sho’ ’bominates uh skinny ’oman. Lawdy, you sho’ is got one portly shape on you! You kin git *anything* you wants. Dis is *mah* town an’ you sho’ kin have it.”

Delia's work-worn knees crawled over the earth in Gethsemane and up the rocks of Calvary many, many times during these months. She avoided the villagers and meeting places in her efforts to be blind and deaf. But Bertha nullified this to a degree, by coming to Delia's house to call Sykes out to her at the gate.

Delia and Sykes fought all the time now with no peaceful interludes. They slept and ate in silence. Two or three times Delia had attempted a timid friendliness, but she was repulsed each time. It was plain that the breaches must remain agape.

The sun had burned July to August. The heat streamed down like a million hot arrows, smiting all things living upon the earth. Grass withered, leaves browned, snakes went blind in shedding and men and dogs went mad. Dog days!

Delia came home one day and found Sykes there before her. She wondered, but started to go on into the house without speaking, even though he was standing in the kitchen door and she must either stoop under his arm or ask him to move. He made no room for her. She noticed a soap box beside the steps, but paid no particular attention to it, knowing that he must have brought it there. As she was stooping to pass under his outstretched arm, he suddenly pushed her backward, laughingly.

"Look in de box dere Delia, Ah done brung yuh somethin'!"

She nearly fell upon the box in her stumbling, and when she saw what it held, she all but fainted outright.

"Syke! Syke, mah Gawd! You take dat rattlesnake 'way from heah! You *gottuh*. Oh, Jesus, have mussy!"

"Ah aint gut tuh do nuthin' uh de kin'—fact is Ah aint got tuh do nothin' but die. Taint no use uh you puttin' on airs makin' out lak you skeered uh dat snake—he's gointer stay right heah tell he die. He wouldn't bite me cause Ah knows how tuh handle 'im. Nohow he wouldn't risk breakin' out his fangs 'gin yo' skinny laigs."

“Naw, now Syke, don’t keep dat thing ’roun’ heah tuh skeer me tuh death. You knows Ah’m even feared uh earth worms. Thass de biggest snake Ah evah did see. Kill ’im Syke, please.”

“Doan ast me tuh do nothin’ fuh yuh. Goin’ ’roun’ tryin’ tuh be so damn asterperious. Naw, Ah aint gonna kill it. Ah think uh damn sight mo’ uh him dan you! Dat’s a nice snake an’ anybody doan lak ’im kin jes’ hit de grit.”

The village soon heard that Sykes had the snake, and came to see and ask questions.

“How de hen-fire did you ketch dat six-foot rattler, Syke?” Thomas asked.

“He’s full uh frogs so he caint hardly move, thass how Ah eased up on’m. But Ah’m a snake charmer an’ knows how tuh handle ’em. Shux, dat aint nothin’. Ah could ketch one eve’y day if Ah so wanted tuh.”

“Whut he needs is a heavy hick’ry club leaned real heavy on his head. Dat’s de bes ’way tuh charm a rattlesnake.”

“Naw, Walt, y’ll jes’ don’t understand dese dia-mon’ backs lak Ah do,” said Sykes in a superior tone of voice.

The village agreed with Walter, but the snake stayed on. His box remained by the kitchen door with its screen wire covering. Two or three days later it had digested its meal of frogs and literally came to life. It rattled at every movement in the kitchen or the yard. One day as Delia came down the kitchen steps she saw his chalky-white fangs curved like scimitars hung in the wire meshes. This time she did not run away with averted eyes as usual. She stood for a long time in the doorway in a red fury that grew bloodier for every second that she regarded the creature that was her torment.

That night she broached the subject as soon as Sykes sat down to the table.

“Syke, Ah wants you tuh take dat snake ’way fum heah. You done starved me an’ Ah put up widcher, you done beat me an Ah took dat, but you done kilt all mah insides bringin’ dat varmint heah.”

Sykes poured out a saucer full of coffee and drank it deliberately before he answered her.

“A whole lot Ah keer 'bout how you feels inside uh out. Dat snake aint goin' no damn wheah till Ah gits ready fuh 'im tuh go. So fur as beatin' is concerned, yuh aint took near all dat you gointer take ef yuh stay 'roun' *me*.”

Delia pushed back her plate and got up from the table. “Ah hates you, Sykes,” she said calmly. “Ah hates you tuh de same degree dat Ah useter love yuh. Ah done took an' took till mah belly is full up tuh mah neck. Dat's de reason Ah got mah letter fum de church an' moved mah membership tuh Woodbridge—so Ah don't haftuh take no sacrament wid yuh. Ah don't wantuh see yuh 'roun' me atall. Lay 'roun' wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh, but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. At hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog.”

Sykes almost let the huge wad of corn bread and collard greens he was chewing fall out of his mouth in amazement. He had a hard time whipping himself up to the proper fury to try to answer Delia.

“Well, Ah'm glad you does hate me. Ah'm sho' tiahed uh you hangin' ontuh me. Ah don't want yuh. Look at yuh stringey ole neck! Yo' rawbony laigs an' arms is enough tuh cut uh man tuh death. You looks jes' lak de devvul's doll-baby tuh *me*. You cain't hate me no worse dan Ah hates you. Ah been hatin' *you* fuh years.

“Yo' ole black hide don't look lak nothin' tuh me, but uh passle uh wrinkled up rubber, wid yo' big ole yeahs flappin' on each side lak up paih uh buzzard wings. Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks bout *you*, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah.” Delia said this with no signs of fear and Sykes departed from the house, threatening her, but made not the slightest move to carry out any of them.

That night he did not return at all, and the next day being Sunday, Delia was glad that she did not have to quarrel before she hitched up her oonv and drove the four miles to Woodbridge.

She stayed to the night service—"love feast"—which was very warm and full of spirit. In the emotional winds her domestic trials were borne far and wide so that she sang as she drove homeward,

"Jurden water, black an coV

Chills de body, not de soul

An Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time A

She came from the barn to the kitchen door and stopped.

"Whut's de mattah, ol' satan, you aint kickin' up yo' racket?" She addressed the snake's box. Complete silence. She went on into the house with a new hope in its birth struggles. Perhaps her threat to go to the white folks had frightened Sykes! Perhaps he was sorry! Fifteen years of misery and suppression had brought Delia to the place where she would hope *anything* that looked towards a way over or through her wall of inhibitions.

She felt in the match safe behind the stove at once for a match. There was only one there.

"Dat niggah wouldn't fetch nothin' heah tuh save his rotten neck, but he kin run thew whut Ah brings quick enough. Now he done toted off nigh on tuh haff uh box uh matches. He done had dat 'oman heah in mah house, too."

Nobody but a woman could tell how she knew this even before she struck the match. But she did and it put her into a new fury.

Presently she brought in the tubs to put the white things to soak. This time she decided she need not bring the hamper out of the bedroom; she would go in there and do the sorting. She picked up the pot-bellied lamp and went in. The room was small and the hamper stood hard by the foot of the white iron bed. She could sit and reach through the bedposts—resting as she worked.

"Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time." She was singing again. The mood of the "love feast" had returned. She threw back the lid of the basket

almost gaily. Then, moved by both horror and terror, he spring back toward the door. *There lay the snake in the basket!* He moved sluggishly at first, but even as she turned round and round, jumped up and down in an insanity of fear, he began to stir vigorously. She saw him pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed, then she seized the lamp and ran as fast as she could to the kitchen. The wind from the open door blew out the light and the darkness added to her terror. She sped to the darkness of the yard, slamming the door after her before she thought to set down the lamp. She did not feel safe even on the ground, so she climbed up in the hay barn.

There for an hour or more she lay sprawled upon the hay a gibbering wreck.

Finally she grew quiet, and after that, coherent thought. With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm.

“Well, Ah done de bes’ Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault.”

She went to sleep—a twitchy sleep—and woke up to a faint gray sky. There was a loud hollow sound below. She peered out. Sykes was at the wood-pile, demolishing a wire-covered box.

He hurried to the kitchen door, but hung outside there some minutes before he entered, and stood some minutes more inside before he closed it after him.

The gray in the sky was spreading. Delia descended without fear now, and crouched beneath the low bedroom window. The drawn shade shut out the dawn, shut in the night. But the thin walls held back no sound.

“Dat ol’ scratch is woke up now!” She mused at the tremendous whirr inside, which every woodsman knows, is one of the sound illusions. The rattler is a ventriloquist. His whirr sounds to the right, to the left, straight ahead, behind, close under foot—everywhere but where it is. Woe to him who guesses wrong unless he is prepared to hold up his end of the argument! Sometimes he strikes without rattling at all.

Inside, Sykes heard nothing until he knocked a pot lid off the stove while trying to reach the match safe in the dark. He had emptied his pockets at Bertha's.

The snake seemed to wake up under the stove and Sykes made a quick leap into the bedroom. In spite of the gin he had had, his head was clearing now.

"Mah Gawd!" he chattered, "ef Ah could on'y strack uh light!"

The rattling ceased for a moment as he stood paralyzed. He waited. It seemed that the snake waited also.

"Oh, fuh de light! Ah thought he'd be too sick"—Sykes was muttering to himself when the whirr began again, closer, right underfoot this time. Long before this, Sykes' ability to think had been flattened down to primitive instinct and he leaped—onto the bed.

Outside Delia heard a cry that might have come from a maddened chimpanzee, a stricken gorilla—All the terror, all the horror, all the rage that man possibly could express, without a recognizable human sound.

A tremendous stir inside there, another series of animal screams, the intermittent whirr of the reptile. The shade torn violently down from the window, letting in the red dawn, a huge brown hand seizing the window stick, great dull blows upon the wooden floor punctuating the gibberish of sound long after the rattle of the snake had abruptly subsided. All this Delia could see and hear from her place beneath the window, and it made her ill. She crept over to the four-o'clocks and stretched herself on the cool earth to recover.

She lay there. "Delia, Delia!" She could hear Sykes calling in a most despairing tone as one who expected no answer. The sun crept on up, and he called. Delia could not move—her legs were gone flabby. She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising.

"Mah Gawd!" She heard him moan, "Mah

Gawd fum Heben!” She heard him stumbling about and got up from her flower-bed. The sun was growing warm. As she approached the door she heard him call out hopefully, “Delia, is dat you Ah heah ?”

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her—all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and is one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs. He would see the lamp. Orlando with its doctors was too far. She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

Color Struck - *A Play in Four Scenes*

FIRE!! Magazine - November, 1926

By Zona Neale Hurston

Time: Twenty years ago and present. Place: A Southern City.

PERSONS

JOHN - *A light brown-skinned man*

EMMALINE - *A black woman*

WESLEY - *A boy who plays an accordion*

EMMALINE'S DAUGHTER - *A very white girl*

EFFIE - *A mulatto girl*

A RAILWAY CONDUCTOR

A DOCTOR

Several who play mouth organs, guitars, banjos.

Dancers, passengers, etc.

SETTING.—*Early night. The inside of a “Jim Crow” railway coach. The car is parallel to the footlights. The seats on the down stage side of the coach are omitted. There are the luggage racks above the seats. The windows are all open. They are exits in each end of the car—right and left.*

ACTION.—*Before the curtain goes up there is the sound of a locomotive whistle and a stopping engine, loud laughter, many people speaking at once, good-natured shrieks, strumming of stringed instruments, etc. The ascending curtain discovers a happy lot of Negroes boarding the train*

dressed in the gaudy, twdtry best of 1900. They are mostly in couples—each couple bearing a covered-over market basket which the men hastily deposit in the racks as they scramble for seats. There is a title friendly pushing and shoving. One pair just miss a seat three times, much to the enjoyment of the crowd. Many “plug” silk hats are in evidence, also sun-flowers in button holes. The women are showily dressed in the manner of the time, and quite conscious of their finery. A few seats remain unoccupied.

Enter Effie {left} above, with a basket. ONE 'AS^^OF THE MEN {standing, lifting his "plug" in a grand manner}. Howdy do, Miss Effie, you'se lookin' jes lak a rose.

{Effie blushes and is confused. She looks up and down for a seat.} Fack is, if you wuzn't walkin' long, ah'd think you wuz a rose—{he looks timidly behind her and the others laugh}. Looka here, where's Sam at?

EFFIE {tossing her head haughtily}. I don't know an' I don't keer.

THE MAN {visibly relieved}. Then lemme scorch you to a seat. {He takes her basket and leads her to a seat center of the car, puts the basket in the rack and seats himself beside her with his hat at a rakish angle.}

MAN {sliding his arm along the back of the seat}. How come Sam ain't heah—y'll on a bust?

EFFIE {angrily}. A man dat don't buy me nothin tuh put in mah basket, ain't goin' wid me tuh no cake walk. {The hand on the seat touches her shoulder and she thrusts it away}. Take yo' arms from 'round me, Dinky! Gwan hug yo' Ada I

MAN {in mock indignation}. Do you think I'd look at Ada when Ah got a chance tuh be wid you ? Ah always wuz sweet on you, but you let ole Mullet-head Sam cut me out.

ANOTHER MAN {with head out of the window}. Just look at de darkies coming! {With head insite coach.} Hey, Dinky! Heah come Ada wid a great big basket.

{Dinky jumps up from beside Effie and rushes to exit right. In a moment they re-enter and take a seat near entrance. Everyone in coach laughs. Dinky's girl turns and calls back to Effie.}

GIRL. Where's Sam, Effie?

EFFIE. Lawd knows, Ada.

GIRL. Lawd a mussy! Who you gointer walk de cake wid ?

EFFIE. Nobody, Ah reckon. John and Emma gointer win it nohow. They's the bestest cakewalkers in dis state.

ADA. You'se better than Emma any day in de week. Cose Sam cain't walk lake John. *{She stands up and scans the coach.}* Looka heah, ain't John an' Emma going? They ain't on heah!

{The locomotive bell begins to ring.}

EFFIE. Mah Gawd, s'pose dey got left I

MAN *{with head out of window}*. Heah they come, nip and tuck—whoo-ee! They'se gonna make it! *{He waves excitedly.}* Come on Jawn! *{Everybody crowds the windows, encouraging them by gesture and calls. As the whistle blows twice, and the train begins to move, they enter panting and laughing at left. The only seat left is the one directly in front of Effie.}*

DINKY *{standing}*. Don't y'all skeer us no mo' lake dat! There couldn't be no cake walk thout y'all. Dem shad-mouf St. Augustine coons would win dat cake and we would have tuh kill 'em all bodaciously.

JOHN. It was Emmaline nearly made us get left. She says I wuz smiling at Effie on the street car and she had to get off and wait for another one.

EMMA *{removing the hatpins from her hat, turns furiously upon him}*. You wuz grinning at her and she wuz grinning back jes lake a ole chessy cat!

JOHN *{positively}*. I wuzn't.

EMMA *{about to place her hat in rack}*. You wuz. I seen you looking jes lake a possum.

JOHN. I wuzn't. I never gits a chance tuh smile at nobody—you won't let me.

EMMA. Jes the same every time you sees a yaller face, you *takes* a chance. *{They sit down in peeved silence for a minute.}*

DINKY. Ada, les we all sample de basket. I bet you got huckleberry pie.

ADA. No I aint, I got peach an' tater pies, but we aint gonna tetch a thing tell we gits tuh de hall.

DINKY *{mock alarm}*. Naw, don't do dat! It's all right tuh save the fried chicken, but pies is *always* et on trains.

ADA. Aw shet up! *{He struggles with her for a kiss. She slaps him but finally yields.}*

JOHN *{looking behind him}*. Hellow, Effie, where's Sam?

EFFIE. Deed, I don't know.

JOHN. Y'all on a bust?

EMMA. None ah yo' bizness, you got enough tuh mind yo' own self. Turn 'round!

{She puts up a pouting mouth and he snatches a kiss. She laughs just as he kisses her again and there is a resounding smack which causes the crowd to laugh. And cries of "Oh you kid!" "Salty dog!"}

{Enter conductor left calling tickets cheerfully and laughing at the general merriment.}

CONDUCTOR. I hope somebody from Jacksonville wins this cake.

JOHN. You live in the "Big Jack?"

CONDUCTOR. Sure do. And I wanta taste a piece of that cake on the way back tonight.

JOHN. Jes rest easy—them Augustiners aint gonna smell it. (*Turns to Emma.*) Is they, baby?

EMMA. Not if Ah kin help it.

Somebody with a guitar sings: “Ho babe, mah honey taint no lie.”

{The conductor takes up tickets, passes on and exits right.}

WESLEY. Look heah, you cake walkers—y’all oughter git up and limber up yo’ joints. I heard them folks over to St. Augustine been oiling up wid goose-grease, and over to Ocala they been rubbing down in snake oil.

A WOMAN'S VOICE. You better shut up, Wesley, you just joined de church last month. Somebody’s going to tell the pastor on you.

WESLEY. Tell it, tell it, take it up and smell it. Come on out you John and Emma and Effie, and limber up.

JOHN. Naw, we don’t wanta do our walking steps—nobody won’t wanta see them when we step out at the hall. But we kin do something else just to warm ourselves up.

{Wesley begins to play “Goo Goo Eyes” on his accordian, the other instruments come in one by one and John and Emma step into the aisle and “parade” up and down the aisle—Emma holding up her skirt, showing the lace on her petticoats. They two-step back to their seat amid much applause.}

WESLEY. Come on out, Effie! Sam aint heah so you got to hold up his side too. Step on out. *{There is a murmur of applause as she steps into the aisle. Wesley strikes up “Em gointer live anyhow till I die.” It is played quite spiritedly as Effie swings into the pas-me-la—}*

WESLEY *{in ecstasy}*. Hot stuff I reckon! Hot stuff I reckon! *{The musicians are stamping. Great enthusiasm. Some clap time with hands and feet. She*

hurls herself into a modified Hoochy Koochy, and finishes up with an ecstatic yell.)

There is a babble of talk and laughter and exultation.

JOHN {*applauding loudly*). If dat Effie can't step nobody can.

EMMA. Course you'd say so cause it's her. Everything she do is pretty to you.

JOHN {*caressing her*). Now don't say that, Honey. Dancing is dancing no matter who is doing it. But nobody can hold a candle to you in nothing.

{Some men are heard tuning up—getting pitch to sing. Four of them crowd together in one seat and begin the chorus of "Daisies Wont Tell." John and Emma grow quite affectionate.)

JOHN {*kisses her*). Emma, what makes you always picking a fuss with me over some yaller girl.

What makes you so jealous, nohow ? I don't do nothing.

(She clings to him, but he turns slightly away. The train whistle blows, there is a slackening of speed. Passengers begin to take down baskets from their racks.)

EMMA. John! John, don't you want me to love you, honey?

JOHN (*turns and kisses her slowly*). Yes, I want you to love me, you know I do. But I don't like to be accused o' ever light colored girl in the world. It hurts my feeling. I don't want to be jealous like you are.

(Enter at right Conductor, crying "St. Augustine, St. Augustine." He exits left. The crowd has congregated at the two exits, pushing good-naturedly and joking. All except John and Emma. They are still seated with their arms about each other.)

EMMA (*sadly*). Then you don't want my love, John, cause I can't help mahself from being jealous. I loves you so hard, John, and jealous love is

the only kind I got.

(John kisses her very feelingly.)

EMMA. Just for myself alone is the only way I knows how to love.

(They are standing in the aisle with their arms about each other as the curtain falls.)

SCENE II

SETTING.—*A weather-board hall. A large room with the joists bare. The place has been divided by a curtain of sheets stretched and a rope across from left to right. From behind the curtain there are occasional sounds of laughter, a note or two on a stringed instrument or accordion. General stir. That is the dance hall. The front is the ante-room where the refreshments are being served. A “plank” seat runs all around the hall, along the walls. The lights are kerosene lamps with reflectors. They are fixed to the wall. The lunch-baskets are under the seat. There is a table on either side upstage with a woman behind each. At one, ice cream is sold, at the other, roasted peanuts and large red-and-white sticks of peppermint candy.*

People come in by twos and three, laughing, joking, horse-plays, gauchily flowered dresses, small waists, bulging hips and busts, hats worn far back on the head, etc. People from Ocala greet others from Palatka, Jacksonville, St. Augustine, etc.

Some find seats in the ante-room, others pass on into the main hall.

Enter the Jacksonville delegation, laughing, pushing proudly.

DINKY. Here we is, folks—here we is. Gointer take dat cake on back tuh Jacksonville where it belongs.

MAN. Gwan! Whut wid you mullet-head Jacksonville Coons know whut to do wid a cake. It’s gointer stay right here in Augustine where de good cake walkers grow.

DINKY. Taint no 'Walkers' never walked till John and Emmaline prance out—you mighty come a tootin'.

Great laughing and joshing as more people come in. John and Emma are encouraged, urged on to win.

EMMA. Let's we git a seat, John, and set down.

JOHN. Sho will—nice one right over there. *(They push over to wall seat, place basket underneath, and sit. Newcomers shake hands with them and urge them on to win.)*

(Enter Joe Clarke and a small group. He is a rotund, expansive man with a liberal watch chain and charm.)

DINKY *(slapping Clarke on the back)*. If you don't go 'way from here! Lawdy, if it aint Joe.

CLARKE *(jovially)*. Ah thought you had done forgot us people in Eatonville since you been living up here in Jacksonville.

DINKY. Course Ah aint. *(Turning.)* Looka heah folks! Joe Clarke oughta be made chairman uh dis meetin'—Ah mean Past Great-Grand Master of Ceremonies, him being the onliest mayor of de onliest colored town in de state.

GENERAL CHORUS. Yeah, let him be—thass fine, etc.

DINKY *(setting his hat at a new angle and throwing out his chest)*. And Ah'll scorch him to de platform. Ahem!

{Sprinkling of laughter as Joe Clarke is escorted into next room by Dinky.}

{The musicians are arriving one by one during this time. A guitar, accordion, mouth organ, banjo, etc. Soon there is a rapping for order heard inside and the voice of Joe Clarke.}

JOE CLARKE. Git yo' partners one an' all for de gran' march! Git yo' partners, gent-mens!

A MAN *{drawing basket from under bench}*. Let's we all eat first.

{John and Emma go buy ice-cream. They co-quettishly eat from each other's spoons. Old Man Lizzimore crosses to Effie and removes his hat and bows with a great flourish.}

LIZZIMORE. Sam ain't here t'night, is he, Effie.

EFFIE *{embarrassed}*. Naw suh, he aint.

Lizz. Well, you like chicken? *{Extends arm to her.}* Take a wing!

{He struts her up to the table amid the laughter of the house. He wears no collar.}

JOHN *{squeezes Emma's hand}*. You certainly is a ever loving mamma—when you aint mad.

EMMA *{smiles sheepishly}*. You oughtn't to make me mad then.

JOHN. Ah don't make you! You makes yo'self mad, den blame it on me. Ah keep on tellin' you Ah don't love nobody but you. Ah knows heaps uh half-white girls Ah could git ef Ah wanted to. But *{he squeezes her hard again}* Ah jus' wants you! You know what they say! De darker de berry, de sweeter de taste!

EMMA *{pretending to pout}*. Oh, you tries to run over me an' keep it under de cover, but Ah won't let yuh. *{Both laugh.}* Les' we eat our basket!

JOHN. Alright. *{He pulls the basket out and she removes the table cloth. They set the basket on their knees and begin to eat fried chicken.}*

MALE VOICE. Les' everybody eat—motion's done carried. *{Everybody begins to open baskets. All have fried chicken. Very good humor prevails. Delicacies are swapped from one basket to the other. John and Emma offer the man next them some supper. He takes a chicken leg. Effie crosses to John and Emma with two pieces of pie on a plate.}*

EFFIE. Y'll have a piece uh mah blueberry pie—it's mighty nice! *{She proffers it with a timid smile to Emma who "freezes" up instantly.}*

EMMA. Naw! We don't want no pie. We got cocoanut layer-cake.

JOHN. Ah—Ah think ah'd choose a piece uh pie, Effie. *{He takes it.}* Will you set down an' have a snack wid us? *{He slides over to make room.}*

EFFIE *{nervously}*. Ah, naw, Ah got to run on back to mah basket, but Ah thought maybe y'll mout' want tuh taste mah pie. *{She turns to go.}*

JOHN. Thank you, Effie. It's mighty good, too. *{He eats it. Effie crosses to her seat. Emma glares at her for a minute, then turns disgustedly away from the basket. John catches her shoulder and faces her around.}*

JOHN *{pleadingly}*. Honey, be nice. Don't act lak dat!

EMMA *{jerking free}*. Naw, you done ruint mah appetite now, carryin' on wid dat punkin-colored ole gal.

JOHN. Whut kin Ah do? If you had a acted polite Ah wouldn't a had nothin' to say.

EMMA. Naw, youse jus' hog-wile ovah her cause she's half-white! No matter whut Ah say, you keep carryin' on wid her. Act polite? Naw Ah aint gonna be deceitful an' bust mah gizzard fuh nobody! Let her keep her dirty ole pie ovah there where she is!

JOHN *{looking around to see if they are overheard}*. Sh-sh! Honey, you mustn't talk so loud.

EMMA *{louder}*. Ah-Ah aint gonna bite mah tongue! If she don't like it she can lump it. Mah back is broad—*{John tries to cover her mouth with his hand}*. She calls herself a big cigar, but I kin smoke her!

{The people are laughing and talking for the most part and pay no attention. Effie is laughing and talking to those around her and does not hear the tirade. The eating is over and everyone is going behind the curtain. John and Emma put away their basket like the others, and sit glum. Voice of

Master-of-ceremonies can be heard from beyond curtain announcing the pas-me-la contest. The contestants, mostly girls, take the floor. There is no music except the clapping of hands and the shouts of "Parse-me-lah" in time with the hand-clapping. At the end Master announces winner. Shadows seen on curtain.)

MASTER. Mathilda Clarke is winner—if she will step forward she will receive a beautiful wook fascinators. *{The girl goes up and receives it with great hand-clapping and good humor.}* And now since the roosters is crowin' foah midnight, an' most of us got to git up an' go to work tomorrow, The Great Cake Walk will begin. Ah wants de floor cleared, cause de representatives of de several cities will be announced an' we wants 'em to take de floor as their names is called. Den we wants 'em to do a gran' promenade roun' de hall. An' they will then commence to walk fuh de biggest cake ever baked in dis state. Ten dozen eggs—ten pounds of flour —ten pounds of butter, and so on and so forth.

Now then—*(he strikes a pose)* for St. Augustine— Miss Lucy Taylor, Mr. Ned Coles.

(They step out amid applause and stand before stage.)

For Daytona—

Miss Janie Bradley, Enoch Nixon

(Same business.)

For Ocala—

Miss Docia Boger, Mr. Oscar Clarke

(Same business.)

For Palatka—

Miss Maggie Lemmons, Mr. Senator Lewis

(Same business.)

And for Jacksonville the most popular “walkers” in de state—

Miss Emmaline Beazeby, Mr. John Turner.

(Tremendous applause. John rises and offers his arm grandiloquently to Emma.)

EMMA *(pleadingly, and clutching his coat)*. John let’s we all don’t go in there with all them. Let’s we all go on home.

JOHN *(amazed)*. Why, Emma?

EMMA. Cause, cause all them girls is going to pulling and hauling on you, and—

JOHN *(impatiently)*. Shucks! Come on. Don’t you hear the people clapping for us and calling our names ? Come on!

(He tries to pull her up—she tries to drag him back.)

Come on, Emma! Taint no sense in your acting like this. The band is playing for us. Hear ’em? *(He moves feet in a dance step.)*

EMMA. Naw, John, Ah’m skeered. I loves you —I—.

(He tries to break away from her. She is holding on fiercely.)

JOHN. I got to go! I been practising almost a year—I—we done come all the way down here. I can walk the cake, Emma—we got to—I got to go in! *(He looks into her face and sees her tremendous fear.)* What you skeered about?

EMMA *(hopefully)*. You won’t go it—You’ll come on go home with me all by ourselves. Come on John. I can’t, I just can’t go in there and see all them girls—Effie hanging after you—.

JOHN. I got to go in—*(he removes her hand from his coat)*—whether you come with me or not.

EMMA. Oh—they yaller wenches! How I hate 'em! They gets everything they wants—.

VOICE INSIDE. We are waiting for the couple from Jacksonville—
Jacksonville! Where is the couple from—.

(Wesley parts the curtain and looks out.)

WESLEY. Here they is out here spooning! You all can't even hear your names called. Come on John and Emma.

JOHN. Coming. *(He dashes inside. Wesley stands looking at Emma in surprise.)*

WESLEY. What's the matter, Emma? You and John spatting again? *(He goes back inside.)*

EMMA *(calmly bitter)*. He went and left me. If we is spatting we done had our last one. *(She stands and clenches her fists.)* Ah, mah God! He's in there with her—Oh, them half whites, they gets everything, they gets everything everybody else wants! The men, the jobs—everything! The whole world is got a sign on it. Wanted: Light colored. Us blacks was made for cobble stones. *(She muffles a cry and sinks limp upon the seat.)*

VOICE INSIDE. Miss Effie Jones will walk for Jacksonville with Mr. John Turner in place of Miss Emmaline Beazeley.

SCENE III—*Dance Hall*

Emma, springs to her feet and flings the curtains wide open. She stands staring at the gay scene for a moment defiantly, then creeps over to a seat along the wall and shrinks into the Spanish Moss, motionless.

Dance hall decorated with palmetto leaves and Spanish Moss—a flag or two. Orchestra consists of guitar, mandolin, banjo, accordion, church organ and drum.

MASTER *(on platform)*. Couples take yo' places! When de music starts, gentlemen parade yo' ladies once round de hall, den de walk begins. *(The*

music begins. Four men come out from behind the platform bearing a huge chocolate cake. The couples are “prancing” in their tracks. The men lead off the procession with the cake—the contestants make a grand slam around the hall.)

MASTER. Couples to de floor! Stan’ back, ladies an’ gentlemen—give ’em plenty room.

(Music changes to “Way Down in Georgia.” Orchestra sings. Effie takes the arm that John offers her and they parade to the other end of the hall. She takes her place. John goes back upstage to the platform, takes off his silk hat in a graceful sweep as he bows deeply to Effie. She lifts her skirts and curtsies to the floor. Both smile broadly. They advance toward each other, meet midway, then, arm in arm, begin to “strut.” John falters as he faces her, but recovers promptly and is perfection in his style. {Seven to nine minutes to curtain.}) Fervor of spectators grows until all are taking part in some way—either hand-clapping or singing the words. At curtain they have reached frenzy.)

QUICK CURTAIN

{It stays down a few seconds to indicate ending of contest and goes up again on John and Effie being declared winners by Judges.)

MASTER *{on platform, with John and Effie on the floor before him}*. By unanimous decision de cake goes to de couple from Jacksonville! *{Great enthusiasm. The cake is set down in the center of the floor and the winning couple parade around it arm in arm. John and Effie circle the cake happily and triumphantly. The other contestants, and then the entire assembly fall in behind and circle the cake, singing and clapping. The festivities continue. The Jacksonville quartet step upon the platform and sing a verse and chorus of “Daisies wont tell.” Cries of “Hurrah for Jacksonville! Glory for the big town,” “Hurrah for Big Jack.”}*

A MAN *{seeing Emma}*. You’re from Jacksonville, aint you? *{He whirls her around and around.}* Aint you happy? Whoopee! *{He releases her and she drops upon a seat. She buries her face in the moss.}*

{Quartet begins on chorus again. People are departing, laughing, humming, with quartet cheering. John, the cake, and Effie being borne away in triumph.}

SCENE IV

Time'present. The interior of a one-room shack in an alley. There is a small window in the rear wall upstage left. There is an enlarged crayon drawing of a man and woman—man sitting cross-legged, woman standing with her hand on his shoulder. A center table, red cover, a low, cheap rocker, two straight chairs, a small kitchen stove at left with a wood-box beside it, a waterbucket on a stand close by. A hand towel and a wash basin. A shelf \of dishes above this. There is an ordinary oil lamp on the center table but, it is not lighted when the curtain goes up. Some light enters through the window and falls on the woman seated in the low rocker. The door is center right. A cheap bed is against the upstage wall. Someone is on the bed but is lying so that the back is toward the dudience.

ACTION—As the curtain rises, the woman is seen rocking to and fro in the low rocker. A dead silence except for the sound of the rocker and an occasional groan from the bed. Once a faint voice says “water” and the woman in the rocker arises and carries the tin dipper to the bed.

WOMAN. No mo' right away—Doctor says not too much. {Returns dipper to pail.—Pause.} You got right much fever—I better go git the doctor agin.

{There comes a knocking at the door and she stands still for a moment, listening. It comes again and she goes to door but does not open it.}

WOMAN. Who's that ?

VOICE OUTSIDE. Does Emma Beasely live here?

EMMA. Yeah—{pause}—who is it?

VOICE. It's me—John Turner.

EMMA *{puts hands eagerly on the fastening}*. John? did you say John Turner?

VOICE. Yes, Emma, it's me.

{The door is opened and the man steps inside.}

EMMA. John! Your hand *{she feels for it and touches it}*. John flesh and blood.

JOHN *{laughing awkwardly}*. It's me alright, old girl. Just as bright as a basket of chips. Make a light quick so I can see how you look. I'm crazy to see you. Twenty years is a long time to wait, Emma.

EMMA *{nervously}*. Oh, let's we all just sit in the dark awhile. *{Apologetically.}* I wasn't expecting nobody and my house aint picked up. Sit down. *{She draws up the chair. She sits in rocker.}*

JOHN. Just to think! Emma! Me and Emma sitting down side by each. Know how I found you?

EMMA *{dully}*. Naw. How?

JOHN *{brightly}*. Soon's I got in town I hunted up Wesley and he told me how to find you. That's who I come to see, you!

EMMA. Where you been all these years, up North somewheres? Nobody round here could find out where you got to.

JOHN. Yes, up North. Philadelphia.

EMMA. Married yet?

JOHN. Oh yes, seventeen years ago. But my wife is dead now and so I came as soon as it was decent to find *you*. I wants to marry you. I couldn't

die happy if I didn't. Couldn't get over you— couldn't forget. Forget me, Emma?

EMMA. Naw, John. How could I?

JOHN *{leans over impulsively to catch her hand}*. Oh, Emma, I love you so much. Strike a light honey so I can see you—see if you changed much. You was such a handsome girl!

EMMA. We don't exactly need no light, do we, John, tuh jus' set an' talk?

JOHN. Yes, we do, Honey. Gwan, make a light. Ah wanna see you.

{There is a silence.}

EMMA. Bet you' wife wuz some high-yaller dickty-doo.

JOHN. Naw she wasn't neither. She was jus' as much like you as Ah could get her. Make a light an' Ah'll show you her pictcher. Shucks, ah gotta look at mah old sweetheart. *{He strikes a match and holds it up between their faces and they look intently at each other over it until it burns out.}* You aint changed none atall, Emma, jus' as pretty as a speckled pup yet.

EMMA *{lighter}*. Go long, John! *{Short pause}* 'member how you useter bring me magnolias?

JOHN. Do I? Gee, you was sweet! 'Member how Ah useter pull mah necktie loose so you could tie it back for me? Emma, Ah can't see to mah soul how we lived all this time, way from one another. 'Member how you useter make out mah ears had done run down and you useter screw 'em up agin for me? *{They laugh.}*

EMMA. Yeah, Ah useter think you wuz gointer be mah husban' then—but you let dat ole—.

JOHN. Ah aint gonna let you alibi on me lak dat. Light dat lamp! You cain't look me in de eye and say no such. *{He strikes another match and lights the lamp.}* Course, Ah don't wanta look too bossy, but Ah b'lieve you got to marry me tuh git rid of me. That is, if you aint married.

EMMA. Naw, Ah aint. *{She turns the lamp down.}*

JOHN *{looking about the room}*. Not so good, Emma. But wait till you see dat little place in Philly! Got a little “Rolls-Rough,” too—gointer teach you to drive it, too.

EMMA. Ah been havin’ a hard time, John, an’ Ah lost you—oh, aint nothin’ been right for me! Ah aint never been happy.

{John takes both of her hands in his.}

JOHN. YOU gointer be happy now, Emma. Cause Ah’m gointer make you. Gee Whiz! Ah aint but forty-two and you aint forty yet—we got plenty time. *{There is a groan from the bed.}* Gee, what’s that?

EMMA *{ill at ease}*. Thass mah chile. She’s sick. Reckon Ah bettah see ’bout her.

JOHN. YOU got a chile? Gee, that great! Ah always wanted one. but didn’t have no luck. Now we kin start off with a family. Girl or boy?

EMMA *{slowly}*. A girl. Cornin’ tuh see me agin soon, John?

JOHN. Cornin’ agin? Ah aint gone yet! We aint talked, you aint kissed me an’ nothin’, and you aint showed me our girl. *{Another groan, more prolonged.}* She must be pretty sick—let’s see. *{He turns in his chair and Emma rushes over to the bed and covers the girl securely, tucking her long hair under the covers, too—before he arises. He goes over to the bed and looks down into her face. She is mulatto. Turns to Emma teasingly.}* Talkin’ ’bout me liking high-yallers—yo husband musta been pretty near white.

EMMA *{slowly}*. Ah, never wuz married, John.

JOHN. It’s alright, Emma. *{Kisses her warmly.}* Everything is going to be O.K. *{Turning back to the bed.}* Our child looks pretty sick, but she’s pretty. *{Feels her forehead and cheek.}* Think she oughter have a doctor.

EMMA. Ah done had one. Course Ah cain’t git no specialist an’ nothin’ lak dat. *{She looks about the room and his gaze follows hers.}* Ah aint got a

whole lot lake you. Nobody don't git rich in no white-folks' kitchen, nor in de washtub. You know Ah aint no school-teacher an' nothin' lak dat.

{ John puts his arm about her. }

JOHN. It's all right, Emma. But our daughter is bad off—run out an' git a doctor—she needs one. Ah'd go if Ah knowed where to find one—you kin git one the quickest—hurry, Emma.

EMMA *{ looks from John to her daughter and back again. }* She'll be all right, Ah reckon, for a while. John, you love me—you really want me sho' nuff ?

JOHN. Sure Ah do—think Ah'd come all de way down here for nothin' ? Ah wants to marry agin.

EMMA. Soon, John?

JOHN. Real soon.

EMMA. Ah wuz jus' thinkin', mah folks is away now on a little trip—be home day after tomorrow—we could git married tomorrow.

JOHN. All right. Now run on after the doctor—we must look after our girl. Gee, she's got a full suit of hair! Glad you didn't let her chop it off. *{ Looks away from bed and sees Emma standing still. }*

JOHN. Emma, run on after the doctor, honey. *{ She goes to the bed and again tucks the long braids of hair in, which are again pouring over the side of the bed by the feverish tossing of the girl. }* What's our daughter's name?

EMMA. LOU Lillian. *{ She returns to the rocker uneasily and sits rocking jerkily. He returns to his seat and turns up the light. }*

JOHN. Gee, we're going to be happy—we gointer make up for all them twenty years *(another groan)*. Emma, git up an' gwan git dat doctor. You done forgot Ah'm de boss uh dis family now—gwan, while Ah'm here to watch her whilst you're gone. Ah got to git back to mah stoppin'-place after a while.

EMMA. You go git one, John.

JOHN. Whilst Ah'm blunderin' round tryin' to find one, she'll be gettin' worse. She sounds pretty bad—*(takes out his wallet and hands her a bill)*—get a taxi if necessary. Hurry!

EMMA *(does not take the money, but tucks her arms and hair in again, and gives the girl a drink)*. Reckon Ah better go git a doctor. Don't want nothin' to happen to *her*. After you left, Ah useter have such a hurtin' in heah *(touches bosom)* till she come an' eased it some.

JOHN. Here, take some money and get a good doctor. There must be some good colored ones around here now.

EMMA *(scornfully)*. I wouldn't let one of 'em tend my cat if I had one! But let's we don't start a fuss.

(John caresses her again. When he raises his head he notices the picture on the wall and crosses over to it with her—his arm still about her.)

JOHN. Why, that's you and me!

EMMA. Yes, I never could part with that. You coming tomorrow morning, John, and we're gointer get married, aint we? Then we can talk over everything.

JOHN. Sure, but I aint gone yet. I don't see how come we can't make all our arrangements now.

(Groans from bed and feeble movement.)

Good lord, Emma, go get that doctor!

(Emma stares at the girl and the bed and seizes a hat from a nail on the wall. She prepares to go but looks from John to bed and back again. She fumbles about the table and lowers the lamp. Goes to door and opens it. John offers the wallet. She refuses it.)

EMMA. Doctor right around the corner. Guess I'll leave the door open so she can get some air. She won't need nothing while I'm gone, John. *(She crosses and tucks the girl in securely and rushes out, looking backward and pushing the door wide open as she exits. John sits in the chair beside the table. Looks about him—shakes his head. The girl on the bed groans, “water,” “so hot.” John looks about him excitedly. Gives her a drink. Feels her forehead. Takes a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wets it and places it upon her forehead. She raises her hand to the cool object. Enter Emma running. When she sees John at the bed she is full of fury. She rushes over and jerks his shoulder around. They face each other.)*

EMMA. I knowed it! *(She strikes him.)* A half white skin. *(She rushes at him again. John staggers back and catches her hands.)*

JOHN. Emma!

EMMA *(struggles to free her hands)*. Let me go so I can kill you. Come sneaking in here like a pole cat!

JOHN *(slowly, after a long pause)*. So this is the woman I've been wearing over my heart like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can't believe any one else could love it!

(Emma writhes to free herself.)

JOHN. Twenty years! Twenty years of adoration, of hunger, of worship! *(On the verge of tears he crosses to door and exits quietly, closing the door after him.)*

(Emma remains standing, looking dully about as if she is half asleep. There comes a knocking at the door. She rushes to open it. It is the doctor. White. She does not step aside so that he can enter.

DOCTOR. Well, shall I come in?

EMMA *(stepping aside and laughing a little)*. That's right, doctor, come in.

(Doctor crosses to bed with professional air. Looks at the girl, feels the pulse and draws up the sheet over the face. He turns to her.)

DOCTOR. Why didn't you come sooner. I told you to let me know of the least change in her condition.

EMMA *(flatly)*. I did come—I went for the doctor.

DOCTOR. Yes, but you waited. An hour more or less is mighty important sometimes. Why didn't you come?

EMMA *(passes hand over face)*. Couldn't see.

(Doctor looks at her curiously, then sympathetically takes out a small box of pills, and hands them to her.) Here, you're worn out. Take one of these every hour and try to get some sleep. *(He departs.)*

(She puts the pill-box on the table, takes up the low rocking chair and places it by the head of the bed. She seats herself and rocks monotonously and stares out of the door. A dry sob now and then. The wind from the open door blows out the lamp and she is seen by the little light from the window rocking in an even, monotonous gait, and sobbing.)

1. [Drenched in Light](#)
2. [Spunk](#)
3. [John Redding Goes to Sea](#)
4. [Muttsy](#)
5. [Sweat](#)
6. [Color Struck - A Play in Four Scenes](#)